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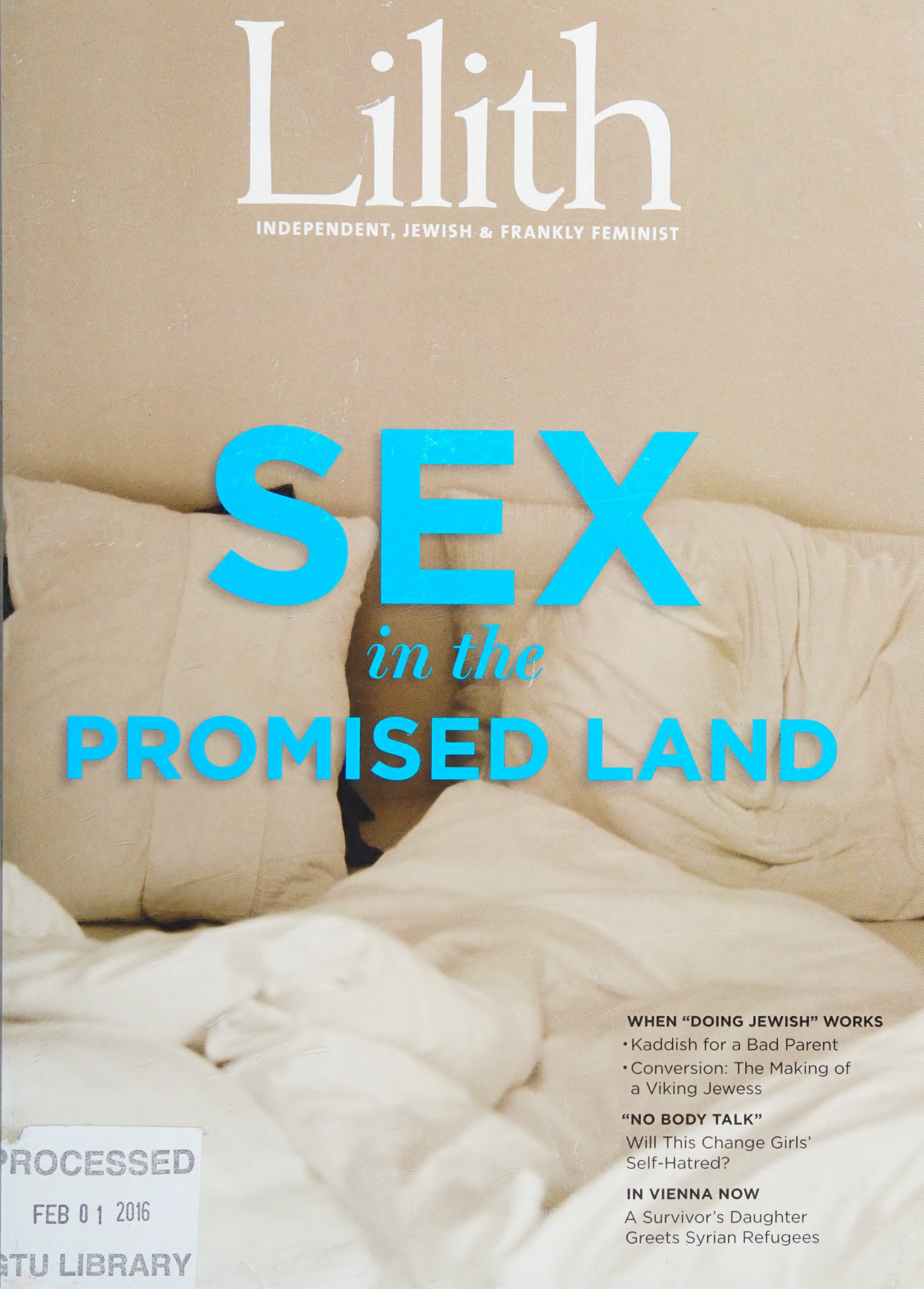

SEX *in the* PROMISED LAND

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- Kaddish for a Bad Parent
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Will This Change Girls' Self-Hatred?

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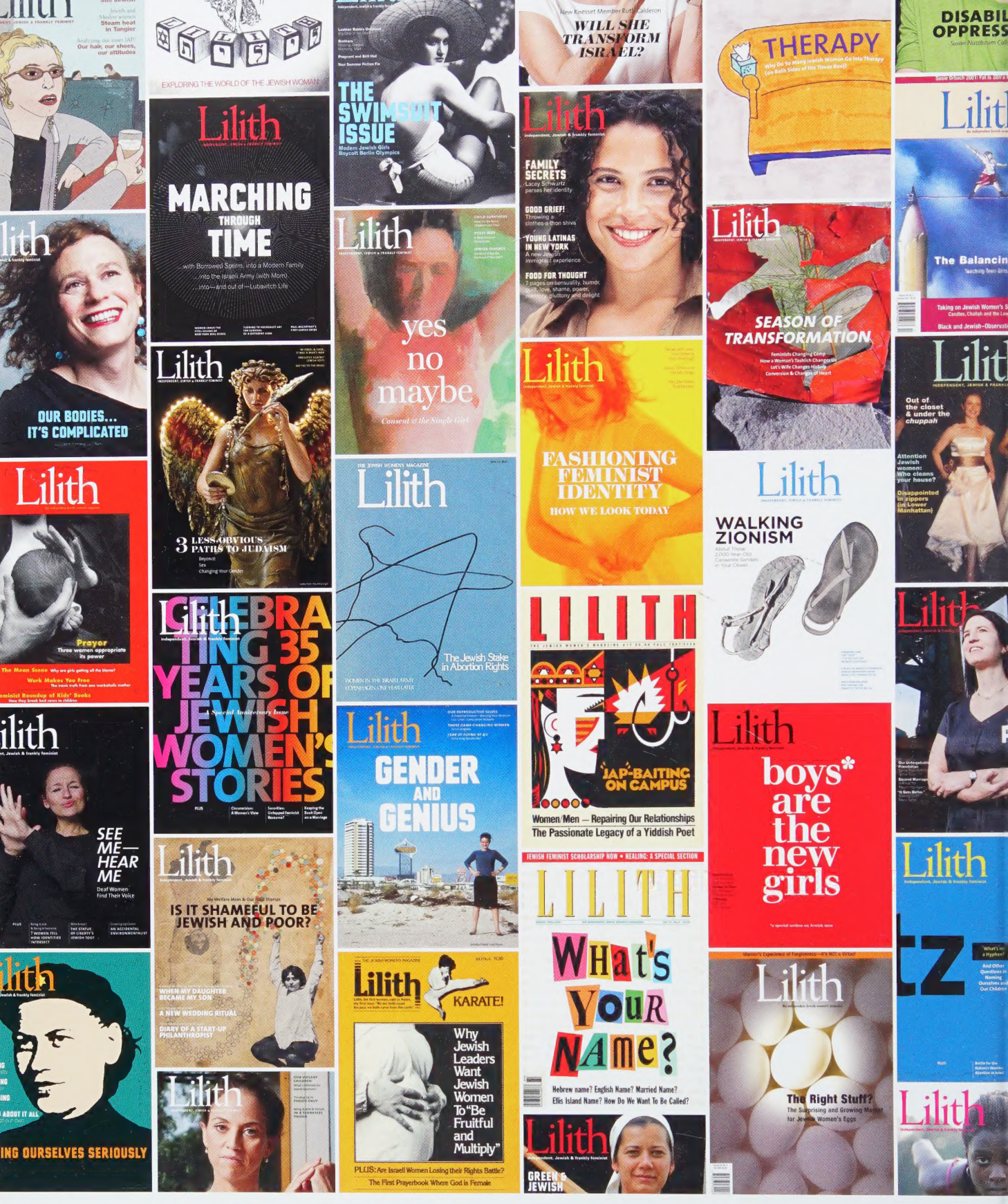
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In the Garden of Eden, long before the eating of the apple, the Holy One created the first human beings—a man, Adam, and a woman, Lilith. Lilith said, "We are equal; we come from the same earth." (Alphabet of Ben Sira, 23a-b)

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—Nessa Rapoport

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ILLUSTRATION: NICOLE HOLLANDER

We're in an era of public breast-feeding, family-sleeping consultants, mommy bloggers (where, by the way, are the daddies blogging?), and impassioned debates over helicopter *vs.* free-range parenting theories. It's hard to remember, but there was a time, in a galaxy not very far away, when motherhood was viewed by some high-profile women as an impediment to the world-repairing work they felt called to do.

Reading Vivian Gornick's new memoir (reviewed here on page 41), I was struck, not for the first time, by how many of the women who were shapers of the women's movement (Second Wavers, if you like) did not have children. At the same time that feminists with and without children created the classic and much-loved *Free to Be...You and Me* (book, TV special, and still-sung-along-to recording), some of their (and my) peers were clear that having children was an option they would not exercise.

In the 1970s, many women perceived that their work in the world would be impeded by having children. Child-free—the term coming into use in some circles then—was a pretty conscious choice, motivated by a desire to correct inequities and

Let's take a collective deep breath and acknowledge the sea-change for women who want to repair the world *and* have kids. This is a truth that has been sort of slyly hidden away, even at a moment when the political and the personal have converged to put the subject of "optioning motherhood" front and center.

[Sidenote: The convergence has been part of Lilith's beat for years now. In fact, Optioning Motherhood is the title of one of the large wall panels in a Lilith traveling exhibition on display around the U.S. and Canada for more than a decade. The pronatalism of Jewish religious injunctions and social values further complicates the conversation.]

Where once abortion rights were the fiery center of activist women's concern, now—for many of you—the concern has shifted to fertility worries, with Jewish organizations even looking to provide some modest support for people seeking to become parents. And women in their 20s and 30s who aren't yet ready to decide about motherhood have a choice only recently

Optioning motherhood: navigating the social, political and medical landscapes right now.

made possible for some women by the advent of The Pill and the widespread availability—at least for a while—of safe and reliable backup abortions. You too may have heard from women who expressed deep worry about the toll motherhood would likely take on them in an era that offered very few public supports for working parents.

Not so long ago the practical, the political and the personal converged to fuel this fear. Employers offered no family leave, few non-family child-care possibilities were on offer for middle-class families in the U.S., and the sharing of child-care responsibilities in a couple was a matter for delicate negotiation. These structural issues melded into the ideological, and children (like cooking, and religious practices) became, for some, a part of the triad of oppressions women needed to protect themselves from (*Kinder*, *Küche*, *Kirche*).

For some younger women, the choice is still to remain child-free. A spate of recent books, like *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids*, are re-opening conversations that a generation or two ago were held behind the closed doors of consciousness-raising groups. Now, some women are airing openly why they are choosing not to become mothers.

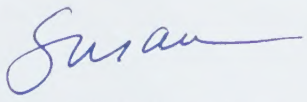
But just as you now see the profound shift in our society's views on the joys of cooking (amateur foodies in the limelight, partly thanks to the fact that men are getting into the kitchen with glee), so too has an honorable focus on parenting (that gender-neutral word rarely heard in the 60s and 70s and 80s) come into its own.

available: the opportunity to freeze their eggs now for possible use down the road; the term in use is "social" egg freezing. F.Y.I.: A fertility center in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. now hosts "Wine and Freeze" information evenings.

Public supports for having or raising children are increasing—albeit slowly and incrementally—as the women's movement and economic forces have jointly reshaped the landscape. Two newsworthy shifts: universal pre-kindergarten is in place in more and more communities, and paid parental and family leave policies in the U.S. are finally following those of more enlightened governments elsewhere in the developed world.

Simultaneous with these changes, people who are partnered or single, lesbian or heterosexual, are creating families through IVF, adoption (see Susan Silverman's memoir on page 30), foster-parenting (see Lilith's fall 2015 issue), egg donation and surrogacy. Jewish women appear to be overrepresented in the ranks of those enthusiastically welcoming new medical treatments just as they are among those establishing new social norms.

We still live in an imperfect world, one in need of revision and repair, but in significant ways the Hobson's choice between doing good work and having children is mitigated by the progress women and the women's movement have engendered.



Susan Weidman Schneider
Editor in Chief

PHOTO: DAVID GREENSPUN

MUSHROOMS

Foraging—A Traditional Jewish Woman's Pursuit!

"Wait, c'mere, is this one?" Running over and making out a lovely, upright yellow form peeking out from the fallen branches, I shrieked in delight, "Yes, yes, yes it is! Our first chanterelle!"

We only found a few more fresh, musky-smelling specimens that evening, but something about our methodical search through the deep Northwest forest reminded me of my great-grandmothers' pursuit of the same foraged food in the woods of Poland and the Ukraine, many decades ago. Wild mushrooms have been, of course, popular foods among all European and Middle Eastern cultures for millennia, but especially when Jews all over Europe could not own property, raising poultry, foraging and collecting the fruits of pasture and forests were part of seeking survival. And women were the main foragers in extended families.

The "Jews ear" or "Judas ear" mushroom (*Auricularia auricula-judae*)—the familiar "wood ear"—is a little mushroom that grows on tree bark, sticking out from the tree's truck in rusty pink-brown colonies that look very much like groups of little veined ears! The name "Jew's ear" apparently was a contraction over time from "Judas ear," so named because, according to Christian legend, after Judas Iscariot reputedly betrayed Jesus he hanged himself from the branch of an elder tree, which often supports communities of this edible fungus.

"The Poisonous Mushroom" is a famous story from the eponymous children's book *Der Giftpilz*, published in 1938 by Julius Streicher, the editor of the widely read weekly newspaper Der Sturmer, devoted to arousing hatred against Jews in Nazi Germany. A mother tells her children as they gather mushrooms in the woods that just as one must be able to tell the poisonous mushrooms from the good mushrooms which resemble them, so too must one be able to differentiate between Jews and non-Jews in society, even though Jews may look the same or act normally. The worthy mother praises her children for already knowing that it is the Jews who are "poisonous," but despairs that not everyone recognizes them for what they are and relates that just one Jew in a village can poison the whole town, the whole region, the whole country! The idea of Jews as "poisonous mushrooms" killing Germany from its insides became a powerful propaganda message of the Nazis before and during the Holocaust.

Despite this vitriolic anti-Semitism, Jews have had cultural, social, culinary and even early spiritual connections with different fungi. With such a long relationship to edible fungi, Jews have created, adopted and passed along hundreds of recipes for mushrooms. (Recipes for mushrooms in cream (*Griby so Smyetonoy*), wild mushroom walnut soufflés, lamb stew with chestnuts and pomegranates and more at Lilith.org.)

Emily Moore, from The Lilith Blog, November 30, 2015.

"I am offended that an academic organization that prides itself on 'difficult dialogue' would adopt any sort of boycott of ideas."

Janet Freedman on the vote by the National Women's Studies Association to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel. From the HBI Blog, November 9, 2015.

NWSA "doesn't condemn, for example, the atrocities being practiced by Hamas, ISIS, Boko Haram and the Taliban against Muslim women, children and dissidents and against Christian, Yazidi and Kurdish women whom ISIS has captured as sex slaves."

Phyllis Chesler in "'Women's studies' is betraying women under Sharia law," New York Post, December 6, 2015.

Olivia Pope's abortion in the 2015 fall finale of "Scandal."

WHY TV CHARACTERS GET ABORTIONS

In American films and TV made since 1916, nine percent of women who got abortions died as a direct result of the procedure...the real risk of death from abortion in the United States is statistically zero percent. (It's worth noting than an additional six percent of abortion-obtaining characters met an untimely end in some other way, like being murdered).

...The characters' explanations for why they need abortions also impact our cultural conversation around the importance of reproductive rights. The reasons characters cited most often were youth, immaturity, a lack of desire to parent, and not wanting to disrupt their career or educational goals. Many other real-life reasons for having an abortion are underrepresented on television, like financial unpreparedness and prioritizing the needs of existing children. "Taken together, this pattern of reasons can contribute to the construction of abortion as a self-focused decision and to the belief that abortions are 'wanted' because of personal desires rather than 'needed' because of circumstances such as poverty," write the study's authors.

From **Sarah Mirk**, "New Research Examines How Abortion Stories Are Told on TV" in *Bitchmedia.org*, December 1, 2015.

THE UNBORN

Who thought that there was anything controversial about posting a fetal ultrasound image on your refrigerator or on Facebook, or even framed on your mantle? A new book with the astonishing title *Feminist Surveillance Studies*, edited by **Rachel E. Dubrofsky** and **Shoshana Amielle Magnet**, explains that these images can fuel the movement to declare the fetus a person:

Many scholars of reproductive technology...have long argued that obstetric ultrasound technology has created a "cult of the public fetus." The fetus becomes a fetishized figure....Established as a separate visual identity outside the mother, the fetus becomes a public persona in the U.S. cultural imagination, used for agendas that range from selling Volvos to promoting anti-abortion campaigns. In the words of Paul P. Brodwin, "Laparoscopy and fetal photography...furnish ever more invasive and naturalized depictions of the fetus, which performs the crucial ideological work (in the context of new Right politics in the United States) of visually separating mother and fetus, asserting fetal autonomy, and reducing women to passive reproducing machines."

VOICES ILLUSTRATION BY LIANA FINCK

RESPONDING TO THE RCA

YouTube as a New Feminist Tool

When **Talia Lakritz** learned in November that American Orthodoxy's Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) had voted to blacklist female clergy, she knew she had to take action. A senior at Barnard College, Lakritz was doing an internship at the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) at the time and while she says she drew strength from her colleagues, her response was very different from statements issued by her elders.

Lakritz took to YouTube.

Her answer to the RCA's vote to ban women rabbis from its member synagogues took the form of a self-accompanied song: "Dear RCA," which has been viewed about 23,000 times. "I sat down at the piano and the song wrote itself in 10 minutes. I had the RCA resolution open on my phone in front of me."

Lakritz is one of the first practitioners of video as a new form of Jewish feminism. While Jewish feminists have long used Facebook, Twitter and the blogosphere to make their voices heard, the move into video is strategically significant. This platform has a higher barrier to entry because its users must master equipment and technical skills. And it's a visual medium, making public the user's face, body and voice. So by definition video defies some traditionalists' desire to silence women.

Lakritz combines her digital chops with a rigorous Jewish background—she went to yeshiva and studied for a year in Jerusalem—and an irreverent sense of humor.

She's been making YouTube videos since high school, but didn't feel moved to express her Jewish feminism through video until a JOFA Shabbat retreat, when the participants wrote down all the maddening notions they'd encountered. What emerged from that exercise was "18 Things Orthodox Jewish Feminists Are Tired of Hearing."

#5: "But you're too pretty to be a feminist."

#14: "Hey, so, I'm a feminist. Totally socially conscious. So. Would you go out with me?"

"I've always been a vocal feminist, but you want to be cautious about what you put online," she said. "I realized this was going to be divisive, but I was ready for that." "18 Things" has been viewed about 50,000 times; its release propelled Lakritz's YouTube channel subscriber list to 1,300 from 500."

Now that I have this audience I definitely feel a responsibility to use it, and to start conversations about things that need to be talked about within the Orthodox community. That's where I consider my home," she said.

Even some of the rabbis she skewers have joined in. Some contacted her to admit that they've said some of those 18 irritating things, and they still found the video funny. And after "Dear RCA" came out, Rabbi Avrohom Gordimer of the RCA called it "satirical/mocking entertainment" in a Times of Israel blog post. Lakritz said she was surprised that the rabbi even watched the video, given the prohibition on men listening to women singing.

"Well," she said. "At least he was entertained."

HELEN CHERNIKOFF

SHE DIDN'T WANT YOUNG JEWISH WOMEN TO FEEL ALONE WITH BREAST CANCER

Sharsheret's Rochelle Shoretz (1972–2015)

At age 28, Rochelle Shoretz was serving as a clerk for Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and was married with two young boys. She had also been diagnosed with breast cancer. While undergoing chemotherapy, she founded Sharsheret ["chain" in Hebrew], an organization with the mission of supporting young Jewish women with breast cancer. The isolation she felt inspired her to found an organization with this singular purpose.

While one in every 400 women in the general population carries the BRCA genetic mutation that triggers breast and ovarian cancers, in the Ashkenazi Jewish population, one in every 40 women carries it.

In the last few years of her life, when her cancer returned, she talked about "the strength that comes with living with a sharpened sense of time." She ran marathons, traveled to South Africa, went white-water rafting, served on federal commissions, and inspired audiences of thousands. She was proud to be unapologetically Jewish and feminist.

Idit Klein, from "We Remember Rochelle Shoretz," *jwa.org*.

JEWISH FEMINIST COURSES—ONLINE!

The barely six-month-old Center for Jewish Feminism is already making waves. Founded by **Dr. Elana Maryles Sztokman**, an America-born Israeli author and educator known to Lilith readers for her articles and blog posts, the center aims for "connection, enrichment and transformation" around pressing feminist issues.

One of the Center's most innovative projects is a series of online telecourses connecting learners and teachers across denominational borders for in-depth, no-holds-barred conversations on often-daunting subjects. One recent telecourse, "DESIRE: Sex, Judaism and Feminism," explored virginity, slut-shaming, sex toys, power, and more, and posed questions like "What is healthy sexuality?" and "Who is allowed to have desire?" In November, the Center brought together educators for a course called "Ready for School: Gender Issues in Jewish Education," which touched on dress codes, fat-shaming, girls and STEM subjects, boys and books, and how Jewish rituals are/should be taught to boys and girls. Sign on at centerforjewishfeminism.org to sign on, catch up with courses you might have missed and view the full range of offerings.

REBECCA HALFF

BERLIN-POTSTDAM

Women Who Became Rabbis Against the Odds

"If it doesn't exist and you want it, it is your responsibility to create it," avowed **Rabbi Lila Kagedan** at the fall conference in Berlin and Potsdam on "The Role of Women's Leadership in Faith Communities: Marking 80 Years of Women in the Rabbinate." Kagedan is a recent graduate of Yehsivat Maharat, the Orthodox rabbinical school for women located in New York City.

Rabbi Regina Jonas literally hovered over our proceedings, her photo projected on a screen high above the stage. Yet, back in 1972, when **Sally Priesand** was ordained a Reform rabbi, Jonas's ordination in Nazi-infested Europe in the 1935 was little more than a footnote in the story of women's road to ordination.

Two decades later, thanks to the persevering scholarship of **Katharina von Kellenbach** and **Elisa Klapheck**, Jonas's story has entered into our collective memory. At the conference, the two joined Budapest filmmaker **Diana Groó**, director of "Regina," to discuss the challenges they faced "to dig Regina Jonas out of the ashes of Auschwitz." Ordained in 1935, Rabbi Jonas had preached and taught in Berlin and in Theresienstadt before she was murdered by the Nazis. In 2014, a delegation, including the first Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative female rabbis and the Orthodox **Rabba Sara Hurwitz** (the title the Hebrew feminine for rabbi), visited the places Jonas had lived. Their pilgrimage inspired the University of Potsdam and the Abraham Geiger College, the first liberal rabbinical seminary on the continent since the Holocaust, to convene this conference.

Over two days an international gathering of more than 100 heard in my opening address the challenges the first women to enter the rabbinate had faced. Like "monkeys in a cage," they were expected to perform and do tricks, quipped **Kinneret Shiryon**, the first woman rabbi in Israel. Scholars present included **Shuly Rubin Schwartz** and **Karla Goldman**. And Christian and Muslim scholars spoke of roadblocks to teaching and leading in their faiths. In a panel chaired by **Anna Azari**, Israel's ambassador to Poland, scholar **Katarzyna Czerwonogóra** dispiritingly concluded: "Women in the Polish Jewish community are invisible or marginalized or instrumentalized." **Marie-Theres Wacker**, of the Catholic theological faculty at Münster University, ruefully remarked how she envied the women who had become rabbis; her tradition has no place for women in the ministry.

Dr. Rachel Elior at the Centrum Judaicum in Berlin.

Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson, former director of the Reform Women's Rabbinic Network in the U.S., asserted that "feminism has become the agent of change." That was evident in Kagedan's account of her journey into the Orthodox rabbinate; she is the first graduate of Yeshivat Maharat to take the title rabbi.

PAMELA S. NADELL

PHOTO: TOBIAS BARNISKE

Amanda Steinberg, founder of the online financial advice resource DailyWorth, "every woman's guide to money, career, and business":

"My mission from the beginning was about empowering women to build net worth. Not to get better at budgeting, not to save $10 when buying flowers for their dinner party. It was to give them control over their futures."

Tara Siegel Bernard, "Financial Advice for Women, from Women," New York Times, November 6, 2015.

WORKPLACE

Jewish Nonprofits Lead on Paid Parental Leave

More than 100 Jewish nonprofit organizations now offer their employees paid parental leave, thanks to the Better Work, Better Life Campaign launched in 2009 by Advancing Women Professionals (AWP), an organization that seeks to expand professional opportunities for women in the organized Jewish community and advance their careers by promoting effective workplace policies. Paid parental leave policies offer paid time off for individuals and couples following the birth or adoption of a child. Research shows that these policies support families, boost productivity, improve retention and enhance employee loyalty. While Jewish organizations outpaced the national average—only 11 percent of Americans have access to paid leave through their employers—AWP challenged the Jewish community to do better.

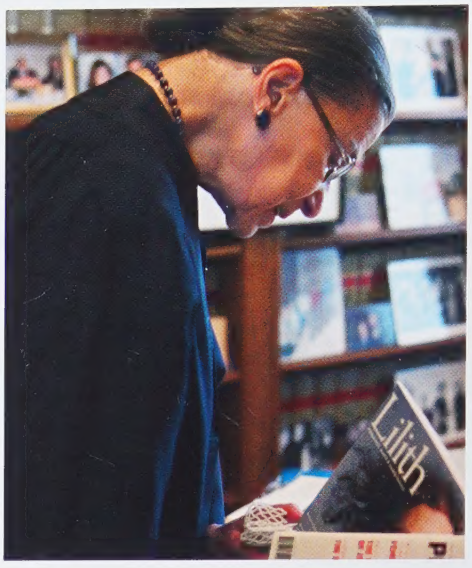
"Of the organizations currently on the list of 100, there were very few that offered paid leave at the start of the campaign," said AWP's founder and president **Shifra Bronznick**. "It took two years to persuade the first 12 organizations to adopt paid leave, and in the following four years, more than 90 additional Jewish organizations have adopted such policies. We were able to accomplish this because over time, we collected evidence that showed that paid leave was big enough to matter and small enough to achieve. We helped Jewish organizations understand that inflexible workplace policies blocked the advancement of women professionals and that changing the norm in the organized Jewish community would benefit everyone who works for us and influence national policy by demonstrating that progress is possible."

DRESS CODE

Sexist school dress codes that view girls' attire as "distracting" to their male peers are not just a Jewish day school problem. Here, a Christian high school student argues against her school administration's dress code in an article in the school newspaper. It'll sound familiar.

"Should a student who got into Harvard with hard work not attend because it causes her best friend to covet her intelligence? Should people stop buying expensive cars or objects that tempt others into theft? And should a woman stop wearing what she wants because a man may lust after her? ...Let's stop telling girls how they should dress, and let's start teaching men how they can control their thoughts and actions. Stop blaming young women for the lust of their male classmates."

Katherine Yenzer in "With Love, from the Author," The Wildcat Roar, September 23, 2015.



RUTH BADER GINSBURG AND GLORIA STEINEM IN CONVERSATION

New York Times columnist Philip Galanes asked a few questions of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, 82, and Gloria Steinem, 81, as the two women got together in Justice Ginsburg's chambers recently. Here's a fragment of their conversation:

PG: Tell us more about that dinner of brand-new Harvard law women, when the dean invited all nine of you, from a class of 500, and asked, "How do you justify taking a spot from a qualified man?"

RBG: I gave him the answer he expected: "My husband is a second-year law student, and it's important for a woman to understand her husband's work."

PG: Did you really think that?

RBG: Of course not!

GS: That's called "Aunt Tom-ing," I think.

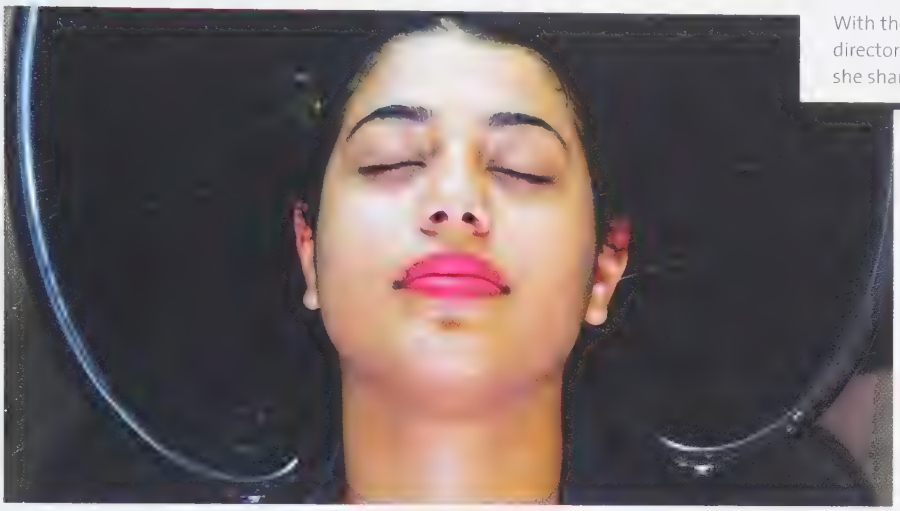
RBG: The only thing that really bothered me is they had given me a generous scholarship. We had to take two years off when [my husband] Marty was in the service. And when I applied for readmission, they said, "Submit your father-in-law's financial statement."

GS: You can't make this up.

From "Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Gloria Steinem on the Unending Fight for Women's Rights," New York Times, November 14, 2015.

RUTH BADER GINSBERG PHOTO BY JOAN ROTH

Fair Trade chocolates match Passover's theme of freedom from oppression. "Fair Trade standards prohibit the use of child and slave labor, a problem particularly in cocoa sourced from West Africa."
Rabbi Deborah R. Prinz, "The Ethics of Hanukkah Gelt," The Lilith Blog, November 25, 2015.



With the camera mounted over her sink at Fifi's hair salon, director Iris Zaki filmed Arab and Jewish Israeli women as she shampooed their hair in "Women in Sink."

FILM

Women in the Sink

Iris Zaki talks to Amy Stone about her "abandoned camera" filmmaking.

A new half-hour documentary by Israeli filmmaker Iris Zaki takes on a humble subject: women's conversations at a hair salon. Zaki went to work in an Israeli Arab beauty shop in Haifa to film the Arab and Jewish clients in conversation with her as she washed their hair—not your usual technique for a film.

The film's punning title cuts to the outcome: Women in Sink. (And its Hebrew title translates as "hair wash" and "overlap.")

I spoke with 37-year-old Iris Zaki in New York the morning after "Women in Sink," her second short documentary, screened at the 9th Annual Other Israel Film Festival in November. Organized by JCC Manhattan, the festival showcases films by and about Israel's minority communities (women being a minority when it comes to equality).

Why an Arab hair salon in Haifa?

I wanted to meet a community that I had lived next to but never had a chance to communicate with, unless I went to eat hummus or to a gas station. I wanted to get close to Arab women and hear about their difficulties living as a minority in a Jewish country. I ended up hearing different voices, of Arab women who are actually happy to live in Haifa among Jews.

Say more about what you found.

I wanted only Arab women, but both Jews and Christian Arabs come to Fifi's. I found co-existence in the hair salon. It's a 100 percent women's environment. Very intimate. I got 100 percent love from these women. Everyone was eating pita with zaatar and chocolate. There is always food and coffee, and the clients discuss women's issues. Nothing about politics. They didn't like me bringing politics into the place. When I went back to London, where I'm doing a Media Arts Ph.D.-by-Practice, the Gaza War started and I had a crisis in editing, showing a film about co-existence. So I edited the film showing that the salon is a bubble. It doesn't represent the reality of Arabs' and Jews' relationship in the country.

How did you get inside the bubble?

I spent over a month at Fifi's as a hair washer. At first, I was terrible at washing hair, but I got better. I mounted a camera directly over the shampoo sink, over the faces of the women. I call it the "abandoned camera." I'm a character in my own film, with my hands washing the women's hair and my voice asking questions. My real strength is not the filmmaking per se, but my skills communicating with people, and this is what I did in the salon. I was there every day cleaning the floor, the toilets. I wanted to be part of it.

One of the best parts of "Women in Sink" is the Arabic music.

It's my grandmother's voice. She was a well-known actress and singer in Cairo. She was Jewish and fell in love with an Arab musician—Mohammed, a Muslim. After 1948, with the establishment of Israel, it was problematic for her to remain in Egypt. She left for Israel with their five-year-old son, my father. Mohammed went to New York—the Upper West Side—and remarried. My grandmother went from being famous to cleaning houses. My last name is Arabic and I was always embarrassed to say my name. My mother's parents were Holocaust survivors from Poland. I never explored my Arabness. At Fifi's I connected to this Arab community, hugging, kissing.

Did you feel frustrated not interviewing any Muslim women?

It is a Christian Arab hair salon, and it represents the people that I met. Because I have my left-wing agenda, sometimes I speak for people who I feel are victims of the situation. It's important to listen to people, even if they say things opposite from your agenda. If people say what you expect them to say, why make films?

What about sexism in the film industry—world over?

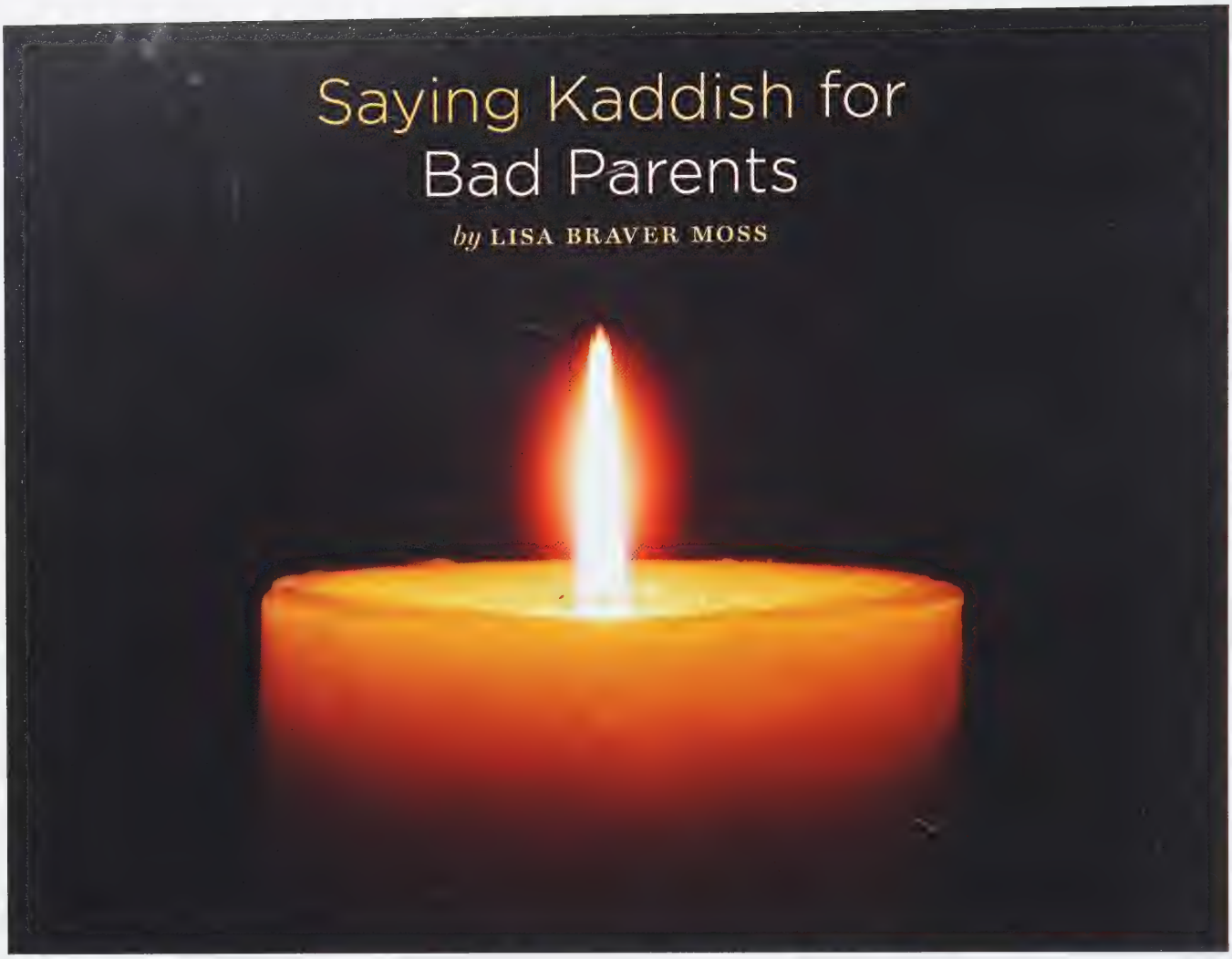
How can we even have a conversation about whether it exists or not? Once salaries are equal for men and women we can talk about it. It's a man's world. Men are so used to being in charge. When you're privileged, you don't see it. It's just like racism in Israel. Officially the law is no different for Arabs and Jews, but then there's the reality.

What next?

I want to find a job for a month and a family to adopt me in a settlement in the occupied territories and make a film about that.

Saying Kaddish for Bad Parents

by LISA BRAVER MOSS



I've always been a bit ambivalent about observing my parents' yahrzeits. For one thing, neither Mom nor Dad had the temperament for traditional ritual observance—and they were skeptical, even scornful, of those who did.

Once in a while, Dad would light a yahrzeit candle for his parents during Hanukkah, because both of their birthdays had fallen at that time of year. He couldn't seem to keep track of exactly when they died. Mom, for her part, didn't light memorial candles for her parents at all. Whether this resulted more from her avowed disdain for them, from iconoclasm, or from disorganization I was never entirely sure.

So it's a conundrum: in acknowledging my parents' passing, I am in effect contradicting them. As pained as I am about who they were, I don't find this kind of defiance as easy (or as gratifying) as might seem to make sense.

Mom and Dad divorced when I was a teenager, but they remained uncannily similar in some ways. Both had strong Jewish identities. Dad felt a deep kinship and intellectual connection with the Jewish civilization, but didn't really see himself as part of a community. Mom loved Israel and Jewish culture, and because she had memories of going to *shul* with her grandfather to observe Yom Kippur, she fasted every year. But she did this alone, and never lasted long in any congregation.

I don't think my parents would understand my need to mark their passing in the traditional Jewish way, and I'm not even sure they'd appreciate it. Dad once started a false rumor that my husband and I were Orthodox (he meant it with the dismissal one might express about

PHOTO FLICKR.COM, SHAWN CARPENTER

someone's having joined a cult). Mom knew she wasn't a good mother, knew that I knew this, and might well denounce my saying kaddish for her as (in her words) "phony baloney."

Kaddish is a prayer said in community, and for me that community is the large Reform congregation with which I've been affiliated for many years. I'm keenly aware, when I chant kaddish for my mother or father, that I am making a public statement. But I don't intend to convey that I am honoring my parents, that I'm grateful for their guidance, or that I admired them.

When I chant kaddish for my mother or father, I don't intend to convey that I am honoring them.

These were destructive people. Dad was a batterer—of both Mom and us kids—and it was only when he began using marijuana every day, after my parents' divorce, that he stopped hitting. He lived to 85 and never acknowledged his behavior. He was a narcissist, and seemed to take my achievements as a personal affront.

Mom, also a hitter, went long stretches without being interested in us when we were kids. When she did take an interest, it was often in order to manipulate, condemn or blame. She spoke openly on a number of occasions of "hating" several of her children, and, like Dad, she was not one to apologize. She walked out on us when I was 16.

Of course everyone has mixed feelings about parents, but I would guess my family insanity was more extreme than that of most of my fellow congregants. If my synagogue community understood my true feelings—that I grieve infinitely more for who my parents *were* than for their passing—would they judge me? Would they still support me, regard me as a legitimate mourner?

A Yizkor Meditation in Memory of a Parent Who Was Hurtful

Dear God,

You know my heart.

Indeed, You know me better than I know myself, so I turn to You before I rise for Kaddish.

My emotions swirl as I say this prayer. The parent I remember was not kind to me. His/her death left me with a legacy of unhealed wounds, of anger and of dismay that a parent could hurt a child as I was hurt.

I do not want to pretend to love, or to grief that I do not feel, but I do want to do what is right as a Jew and as a child.

Help me, O God, to subdue my bitter emotions that do me no good, and to find that place in myself where happier memories may lie hidden, and where grief for all that could have been, all that should have been, may be calmed by forgiveness, or at least soothed by the passage of time.

I pray that You, who raise up slaves to freedom, will liberate me from the oppression of my hurt and anger, and that You will lead me from this desert to Your holy place.

by Rabbi Robert Saks, from Mahzor Lev Shalem, *the 2010 Conservative movement's High Holiday prayerbook, used with permission of The Rabbinical Assembly.*

So it is that I've struggled for years with kaddish. My observance has been instinctual, something whose rationale I couldn't quite articulate. But this past summer, when I went to services for my mother's yahrzeit, something shifted.

My synagogue's ritual committee had recently implemented a change. In the past, the congregation was invited to stand up as a whole before the rabbi would start reading the list of the deceased aloud. The change is that now, instead of this communal act, the congregation stays seated; individual mourners are given the option of standing up when the name of their family member is read. It is only when the whole list has been read that the congregation rises and we all say kaddish together.

This time, when my mother's name was read, I rose alone. As I stood there listening to the remainder of the list of deceased, I could feel the congregation's silent respect and regard for my loss and that of my fellow mourners. There was something about standing in isolation, and yet at the same time in community—the community of mourners, the community of seated congregants—that made me feel personally comforted, personally held in a way I hadn't before.

I suddenly understood something: I am an integral part of my community. And kaddish is what people in my community do. This, the yahrzeit, is the time when I know I'm surrounded by comfort about the chasm of grief I feel about my parents. That grief may not be about the loss of them per se. But it is as genuine as it is enormous.

Here was my opportunity to mourn, and to feel that the depth of my loss is understood and respected regardless of any specifics. I don't think I'll ever again consider depriving myself of that experience.

The congregation rose to join us mourners, and together, we all began to chant. *Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba...* ■

Lisa Braver Moss is a novelist and the co-author, most recently, of Celebrating Brit Shalom *(Notim Press, 2015), the first-ever book for Jewish families opting out of circumcision.*

Body Talk

by DEBRA NUSSBAUM COHEN

Helping girls cut the chatter that hurts, shames and bullies more than we admit.

When Rachel Steinig first heard about the "No Body Talk" guidelines at Eden Village Camp, she found them "a little strange."

"I'd never encountered anything like this," the 16-year-old says of that day five summers ago. When staffers performed silly skits on opening day to illustrate how life works at the Jewish overnight program, they included a bit about No Body Talk, which discourages comments about appearances—criticism *or* compliments—in order to get campers and staff to focus on people's inner qualities.

At a time when everyone—from young children to teens and adults—is buffeted by heavily Photoshopped, idealized images of physical beauty, this camp's zero-tolerance approach is decidedly countercultural.

Not complimenting someone about her skirt or refraining from a self-deprecating remark about what kind of hair day you're having may seem like a small thing. But it's a significant shift in orientation from the way most people communicate. And it creates a big impact, say people who have experienced this difference at Eden Village, part of what the organic farm-to-table Jewish overnight camp in Cold Spring, New York, calls "building a culture of kindness."

"It has been highly impactful for both boys and girls, but typically the groups that have the hardest time with it and find it powerfully rewarding, even life changing, are the teenage girls," reported camp director Yoni Stadlin in an interview.

Last summer Eden Village had 411 campers and 120 staffers. "They're at the epicenter of societal pressure that is not being addressed in formal ways by schools and society. They are in this crucible. They're being squeezed. They have the hardest time [integrating the idea] and the best time, usually, once they do," he said.

Jenn Krueger was skeptical when she first heard about the No Body Talk guide-

lines. Now Krueger, 30, a rabbinical student who has been a "Tribe leader"—division head—for teens under age 15 and a tennis instructor at the camp, says "it took off all this pressure and enabled me to relax into myself in a way that made me feel like there's this place in the world where there's not so much social pressure. I felt like it was the first time in my whole life that the emphasis wasn't on how I was looking and I could just be."

To be sure, not everyone concerned about issues of teens and body image thinks that No Body Talk is the optimal approach.

"Girls and boys need the skills to deal with it. That's what's challenging to me about the idea. It makes sense that camp should be a place to give kids tools," says Rabbi Tamara Cohen, director of innovation at Moving Traditions, an organization devoted to helping teens navigate the post-bar/bat mitzvah years in a Jewish way.

"Camp is an ideal setting to get the skills for how to talk about bodies and not make it a forbidden thing," she says.

According to research compiled by Moving Traditions, 81 percent of ten-year-old girls are afraid of being fat. By middle school, 40 to 70 percent of girls are dissatisfied with two or more parts of their body, and "body satisfaction" hits rock bottom between the ages of 12 and 15.

Of American elementary school girls who read magazines, 69 percent say that the pictures influence their concept of the ideal body shape and 47 percent say the pictures make them want to lose weight.

"Ideally I'd want to see creating various spaces at camp for the conversations," says Cohen. "In bunks, as a fun activity, maybe getting to hear from counselors or CITs how they've navigated some of the issues in their own lives."

Moving Traditions has worked with a couple of camps about what messages people convey, intentionally and not, about body image and sexuality, and is expanding its program in conjunction with The Foundation for Jewish Camp.

In evaluating its program for post-bat mitzvah girls, Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!, Moving Traditions learned that "having a safe space to talk about issues of self esteem and body image and to learn to think critically about societal messages about gender makes a big difference in the lives of girls," says Cohen.

Eden Village's Krueger herself initially thought that No Body Talk might mean skirting difficult subjects.

"I was concerned it could be an avoidance of the issue rather than directly dealing with it. But what I found over time at camp is that it's hard to understand it and the impact it has without being in an environment where it's really carried out," she says.

No Body Talk doesn't mean no discussion, says Stadlin. On the contrary, the camp holds facilitated, deeper talks. "It's just the off-the-cuff commentary we're trying to mitigate. On the surface it seems like we're sweeping it under the rug. But if anything we're bringing attention to it."

Each Saturday the camp holds "conversation circles" on a variety of different topics, from the fanciful to the serious. Older campers choose from groups devoted to "sacred questions," "if I were president," and body image. While most topics change each week, one always focuses on body image, Stadlin says. There are also other guided conversations about body image, particularly with teen and tween girls.

Without constant comments about appearance—or the anticipation of such—campers open up to deeper, richer conversations about body image and everything else, he says.

Personally, says Stadlin, abstaining from body talk "reduces mental noise in my own headspace, where I don't have to think about comments about appearances. In this day and age, with the flood of stimuli and marketing and social everything, this turns the dial down and makes space for other things."

Eden Village has found that even compliments can have a larger, if subtle, negative impact, says Stadlin.

"There's this feeling of 'what is this person going to say tomorrow?' It can cause a very slight hint of pressure after the good feeling washes away."

"When I meet someone and he says 'nice shirt', to me, it feels good in the moment, and I'm not saying it's a bad thing, but it doesn't go very far and it doesn't touch my heart," he says. "When that's off the table for the introduction, it pushes me to actually get to know the person better. That's what I hope for the kids as well."

"You look great. Did you lose weight?"

Eden Village's innovative approach can unleash a flood of emotion in campers who don't even realize how much appearance-related pressure they had internalized.

"Within two or three days of being at camp teenage girls report it feels like it's a huge backpack that's been taken off them emotionally," Stadlin says. "There are pain and tears about the effects and how they feel about it. For a lot of them it feels like the first time they can stick their head out of societal water. They can put their guard down and feel more free to be themselves."

When Stadlin and his wife, Vivian Lehrer Stadlin, were developing the idea for Eden Village, he heard about the No Body Talk concept implemented in the Farm & Wilderness network of Quaker camps that has long employed the approach.

Before Eden Village first opened, in 2010, when initial staff was living on the campus, they tried it out. "It was challenging and very rewarding," says Stadlin.

The camp integrated the approach right from its first summer. When staff

"D'you think these jeans make my butt look big?"

introduced it to the first campers, "the girls were just bawling, sharing stories they'd never shared before about how much time they spent at the mirror and how bad it felt," Stadlin told Lilith.

"This thing had been bottled up. Because nobody talks about this pressure that teens especially face. I sent the older female staff I had, who were more mature, and they made a talking circle" with the most-affected campers. "People shared hard life stories about how they felt about themselves with this pressure. Ultimately it was very healthy. Now a lot of those kids are on my staff."

Tova Garr is a Manhattan-based life coach whose practice focuses on teen girls and their mothers. Garr previously worked in the teen department at New York's Jewish Education Project, and she likes the No Body Talk concept.

"I love it because it comes within the context of education," Garr tells Lilith. "It actually frees girls up, and boys for that matter. We see in boys' world things we didn't used to see, like eating disorders."

And, says, Garr, "the value isn't just the environment, it's being able to notice what kind of internal conversation you're having with yourself. How much of our day is spent thinking about what we look like? For many girls, that's a huge part of their day."

"I hate my hair. It's SO curly. You're lucky yours is straight."

Being in an environment free of body talk "takes the pressure off," says Garr. In her own time as a camper at a well-regarded, traditional Jewish camp, "every morning it was 'what are you going to wear?' I was the kid from Israel who didn't have 5,000 fancy outfits. I spent most of the summer wearing other kids' clothes. It was always a sense of being not good enough, not being able to measure up. It is so much a part of camp life, this comparing. The guideline takes a huge load off," Garr says. "That frees you up to see who you really are."

She spent a day at Eden Village one recent summer. "The day I was there was a drum circle. The kids around the circle didn't look like kids at other summer camps. I've visited hundreds of camps. You always see girls very put together, wearing makeup. Here most of the girls were not made up. They looked like they were hanging out in their own home without anybody watching."

"Kids here make clothes," Stadlin says, "and instead of a compliment you can say 'What's the story with that hat?' and then someone can say 'My grandma taught me how to crochet' and now we're talking about grand traditions, rather than that token good feeling you get for three or four seconds."

Jeremy Fingerman, CEO of the Foundation for Jewish Camp, tells Lilith, "to us it's very impressive…I think of No Body Talk as creating a safe, sacred space for kids and staff."

While Fingerman isn't aware of other camps using the same approach, he said, an increasing number are focusing on anti-bullying efforts and increasing their focus on *chesed*, kindness.

Still, No Body Talk wouldn't work at every camp. Isaac Mamaysky runs Camp Zeke, a two-year-old Jewish camp in the Pocono Mountains focused on physical health and wellness.

"We have a lot of campers coming to us because they want to become fitter, want to think about the condition of their bodies, saying 'I'm going to leave faster, stronger, with bigger muscles'. Our t-shirts say 'fitter, faster, stronger'. It doesn't mean people are focused on appearance all the time," said Mamaysky. But it does involve discussion of how people look. "We have a supportive culture where body talk is part of it because we're working on the bodies," he said.

The Camp Ramah system of nine Conservative-movement residential camps doesn't have a policy in place like the No Body Talk guidelines, but "We do a lot of training before and after camp about how to reduce social and sexual pressure at camp," says Rabbi Mitchell Cohen, executive director of the National Ramah Commission. "It has been one of our top topics."

"Such a high percentage of difficulties in our camps come from problems in these areas where kids' self esteem is based on body image, how they feel about kids picking on them, the whole bullying thing. There is a lot of education about not talking negatively about other people and not emphasizing outward appearance," says Cohen.

Similarly at the Reform movement's Camp Eisner, which has over 900 camp-

ers over a summer at its campus in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, there is no single policy in place.

"For me, it's not just about No Body Talk. It's how do we give campers skills within the world that they live in? How do we show them that it's really possible to live in a way and care for one another in a way that doesn't change the entire environment?" says Louis Bordman, Eisner's director. "We're able to do this at Eisner because we have the microcosm of society, they all come together and we teach them skills and ways of living and being Jewish so that they are able to see what *b'tzelem elohim* [in the image of God] really means. It is an entire approach."

Back at Eden Village, Rachel Steinig liked the sound of the No Body Talk approach when she first heard it, but was "a little worried about its execution."

"I thought it was going to be really hard but it turned out a lot easier than I expected," says Steinig, a home-schooled 11th-grader, who lives with her family in the Mount Airy section of Philadelphia.

"It definitely felt like a relief. I'd finally come to a place where people would like and value me for who I really was, not just my body. In our society there are a lot of pressures on women and girls to look a certain way. All of those pressures disappeared when I came to camp."

After her first summer, when she was 12, she came home and tore up her back issues of Teen Vogue magazine, she said.

"I'm really grateful I came to camp around middle school, and high school is when wearing the right clothes and getting boys to like you is a focus," says Steinig, who attended public school for 9th and 10th grades. "I was really well-equipped to handle these kinds of pressures. I'm not as affected by negative or positive talk about appearances anymore.... I'm not as quick to judge people. Of course I still do, we're all still human, but I don't jump to as quick conclusions."

She brought the approach home, and her family has integrated it too.

"Occasionally we do talk about body positivity but try to refrain from saying things like 'Oh I look so fat in this outfit'," she says. "We're not totally super-strict. We go by what we think is kind and loving. Different things work for different people. As long as there's a kind and loving intention behind it, it's fine." ■

"What a gorgeous bathing suit! I could never get away with that."

Debra Nussbaum Cohen is New York correspondent for Haaretz. She has written for The New York Times, Wall Street Journal and New York Observer and authored Celebrating Your New Jewish Daughter: Creating Jewish Ways to Welcome Baby Girls into the Covenant. *Her daughters have been Eden Village Campers; she has also done grant writing for the camp.*

DISCUSS!

Is there any downside to implementing "No Body Talk"?

It's obviously both wise and compassionate not to comment on another person's skin or shape or size—aspects of our physical appearance over which we often have no control. But is anything lost when we adhere to No Body Talk's admonition not to talk about physical appearance at all, including things we do choose?

Self-presentation is a mode of communication. When we choose what to wear, we're consciously and unconsciously choosing what messages we want to send about ourselves. Sometimes these messages are as simple as "I'm attractive." But we all know people whose attire says things like "I'm a nonconformist," "I have a high social status," "Notice me!" Or even, "I'm much too intellectual to care about my appearance." Through self-presentation, people articulate their gender, athleticism, level of religious observance, hobbies, and more. Shouldn't we pick up on these important and often *intentional* messages?

REBECCA HALFF

(There will doubtless be more discussions on this topic at Lilith salons, so to join one or start one, look here: *lilith.org/salons.*)

READ MORE!

For a wide range of Lilith takes on body image, check out these articles at *Lilith.org*:

- **"Teenage Girls Who *Like* Their Bodies?" by Anna Schnur-Fishman**
- **"A Feminist Camp Counselor Unpacks Her Baggage," by Maya Zinkow**
- **"The Queen of Sheba's Fuzzy Legs," by Rachel Kranson**
- **"One Woman's History of Her Breasts," by Sarah Blustain**
- **"Did You Know the Venus of Willendorf Was Jewish?" by Sander Gilman**

SEX *in the* PROMISED LAND

by BARBARA GINGOLD

Dana Kaplan is doing her doctorate on sex. She has discovered, in her research at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, that the women of Tel Aviv—the (other) city that never sleeps—are spending more time in bed these days. And having more fun. But in Jerusalem, where the high birth rate testifies that women are certainly having sex, the question is open: Are they enjoying it more, or less? And: Is there anything special about the sexual experiences of women in the Holy City?

The women who should know are the members of Jerusalem's Female Interdisciplinary Group for Sexuality (FIGS; the acronym sounds a bit like an off-color joke). This group includes gynecologists, sex educators and counselors, psychiatric social workers, an anthropologist, a nurse-midwife, public health activists, and others. For a while, an ultra-Orthodox doctor with 12 children, married to a rabbi, also attended regularly, as did a Ph.D. dedicated to getting women in touch with their senses through tantric yoga. The 13 core members are now mostly in their 50s or 60s, except for one 40-ish suburbanite who sells sex toys on the web. They have been meeting for more than 15 years to discuss women's sexual health and related topics, working together as a multi-disciplinary team to expand their professional knowledge. They share their findings through private practice and public lectures.

Their clients and case studies are, by and large, limited to Israeli Jewish women or couples who can afford their relatively expensive fees (which start at about NIS 225/$60 per session). And it is no coincidence that the group, which one of its own members describes as "conservative," is based in Jerusalem, the bastion of religious Israel.

Until now, FIGS' approach has been consciously academic. But this past year its members have begun speaking among themselves about their *personal* lives and experiences.

THERE'S SEX. BUT IS THERE DESIRE?

Their monthly meetings—focused on subjects from fantasy, desire and trauma to sex addiction, gender fluidity, and "rabbis in the bedroom" have been addressed by the group's regulars as well as by visiting lecturers like sex-life luminary Esther Perel. FIGS' founder, Talli Rosenbaum, a sex therapist and former physical therapist, attended her first conference of the International Society for Women's Sexual Health in 2002, in Vancouver. When she got back to Israel, she called some of her colleagues to discuss what she'd learned, and FIGS was born.

"My own background was multi-disciplinary, and I felt that women needed an integrated approach to sexuality," Rosenbaum recalls. "But at the time [in Israel] sexual issues were categorized as either physical, calling for medical help, or psychological. There was no appreciation of the fact that cultural, social and environmental factors were also important" and may have a profound—albeit subconscious—effect on a woman's desire.

The professional women who came to hear Rosenbaum's reactions to that conference were a cross-section of religious and non-religious practitioners. Experts in their respective specialties, they were all non-native Israelis who hailed primarily from North America. "We all had different perspectives, and challenged each other."

Among those challenges was Leonore Tiefer's "New View Manifesto," which condemned the "medicalization" of female sexual concerns and declared that "social, political, and economic conditions, including widespread sexual violence, limit women's access to sexual health, pleasure, and satisfaction in many parts of the world." Culture, adds FIGS' Michal Schonbrun, a fertility awareness specialist, determines priorities, budgets, and interventions. Given Israel's social, political and economic conditions, there are bound to be some characteristics that differentiate the sexual experiences of Israeli Jewish women from their Jewish (or non-Jewish) counterparts elsewhere, even, perhaps, differentiating between Jewish women in Jerusalem and those in Tel Aviv.

Take, for instance, a recent book review in the International New York Times, which declared matter-of-factly that most Americans "have come to regard sex—preferably passionate, hot, transformative sex—as central to our lives." On the same September weekend, Israel's daily Ha'aretz plaintively asked, "What can be done to increase the frequency with which Israelis have sex?" Its concern was based on a finding that "half of [Israeli] married couples have sex at least once a week, but at least 18% have sex once or twice a month at most." On the other hand, the report pointed out the relatively high frequency of sex among ultra-Orthodox Jews. If its statistics are accurate, more than a quarter of the tradition-bound married couples who populate Mea Shearim, Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox shtetl, are engaging in halachically sanctioned conjugal relations several times a week.

But these are no doubt a far cry from the liberated sexual activities that doctoral candidate Dana Kaplan is uncovering

PHOTO: FLICKR.COM, JOSEMARQUES

between the sheets of Israel's "new, creative middle class" living in cosmopolitan Tel Aviv. Her research leads her to conclude that denizens of this realm not only endorse but uninhibitedly seek sexual experimentation, from anal eroticism to BDSM (bondage, domination, sado-masochism), as a leisure activity—on a par with gallery-hopping or theater-going—that expresses their individuality. Moreover, she says, their idea of genuine sexual pleasure "entails going against conventional sexual norms or scripts," a concept that would be a serious challenge for a conventionally religious Israeli.

The most blatant differences among Israeli bedroom practices would appear to lie in the great divide between secular and religious or ultra-religious populations. Other differences, however, may be significantly more subtle. Judaism, the historic common denominator of Israeli culture, has long grappled with questions of sexuality. Orthodox researcher and spiritual leader Dr. Jennie Rosenfeld notes the polarities: on the one hand were venerated rabbis and sages who defined marriage as "an intimate relationship whose sole goal is procreation, and is often ascetic;" on the other were shapers of Jewish tradition who valued sexuality outside procreation "as a means of pleasure, love, and companionship." Whichever side they take, Jewish sources agree that conjugal relations should not be approached lightly: lovemaking is a mitzvah, a holy act. While a majority of contemporary Israelis define themselves as non-religious, after millennia of adherence to Jewish law and culture perhaps more than a few fragments of tradition remain embedded in Israel's collective unconscious.

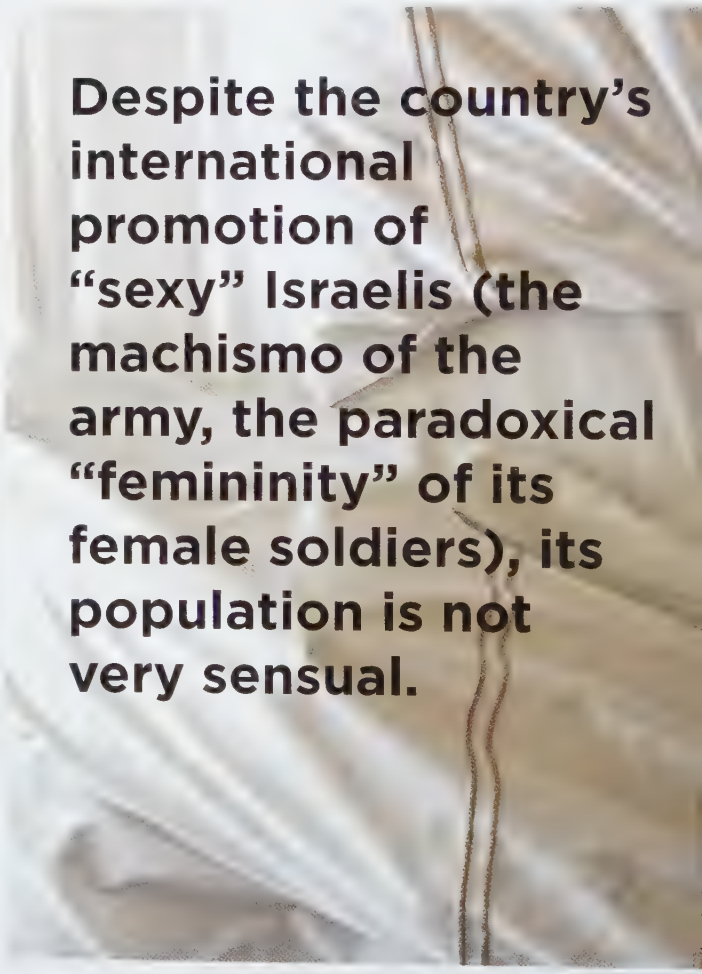
Some of this can be seen in Israel's emphatically pro-natal, pro-family mores. Both married and single women up to the age of 45 are eligible for state-subsidized fertility treatments for their first or second child. Single women who choose to have children usually do so with the blessing of their friends, employers and health funds. And, despite Orthodox Judaism's unbending strictures against male homosexuality, the religion's ultimate regard for the family unit can override even homophobia. Lee Walzer, author of *Between Sodom and Eden: A Gay Journey through Today's Changing Israel* (2000), points out that the Israeli LGBT community has created a new, gay version of the original Zionist ideal: The contemporary Israeli poster child is two kids being wheeled around "by two [male] IDF combat veterans living happily ever after…"

ISRAELIS ARE *RETICENT*?

So, in this presumably modern, liberal, Jewish democracy, what does the school system teach impressionable young Israeli minds about sexuality? Joanne Zack, FIGS' resident sex educator, started her professional life in Israel in 1969 as director of a family planning and education center (similar, she explains, to Planned Parenthood). As a freelance sexual health consultant for the past decade, she has been teaching others—professionals and parents—how to talk to kids about sex.

"The Ministry of Education has an obligatory program called Relationships (*Kishurei Ha'im*) that covers kindergarteners through 14-year-olds, and they have regional supervisors who give courses to the school counselors dealing with sex education," Zack says. "In the early grades, the message is simple: 'Respect your own body and that of others'. That's easy for teachers." Beyond the earliest grades, though, implementation of the official sex-ed program is sporadic and superficial, depending primarily on the attitudes of school principals and counselors. It is often limited to a lecture or two, by visiting doctors or other outsiders, on pregnancy and disease prevention. "Sex talk is difficult and values-laden, requiring skills that school staff don't have," Zack continues. "No one talks voluntarily about sex—even when it comes up in the media. The result is that most kids end up getting their information from peers, or from Internet pornography."

"At nine, they think they're already teens," Zack protests. "Just look at all those sexy little Purim costumes on the streets!" She says that many Israeli 14- and 15-year-olds are becoming sexually active, and contrary to popular rumor, Tel Aviv has no monopoly on the phenomenon: A hotline for kids fields about 25 calls a day, from the far corners of the country as well as its central megalopolis, testifying that youngsters here are not prepared to deal with the media's onslaught of sexual messages.


Despite the country's international promotion of "sexy" Israelis (the machismo of the army, the paradoxical "femininity" of its female soldiers), its population is not very sensual.

Like many of their North American peers, they don't understand that looking sexy is not the same as feeling good sexually, and that being sexual does not necessarily mean having intercourse. "From the beautiful people portrayed on-screen and off," Zack says, "they get distorted expectations. They're anxious about their bodies and their sexuality, and their brains are not yet wired to deal with all the repercussions of having sexual relations."

Across the board, twenty-first-century Israeli parents are not doing their job either, she adds. They don't talk openly with their children about sex. "And that," she emphasizes, "holds true across the religious-secular spectrum—though religious kids have even fewer people they can try to talk to."

Where does this reticence come from? While mythic images of Israel's pioneering generations led us to believe that they were indulging in limitless "free love," those ostensibly liberated individuals were actually subject to a "Puritan sex ethic" that prevailed at least till the 1980s, according to Dana Kaplan. And even today, says Joanne Zack, despite the country's very public international promotion of "sexy" Israelis (the clichéd machismo of the army, the paradoxical "femininity" of its female soldiers), its population is in fact not really sensual or open to their own sexuality. Israel's sexy-looking young women, she has observed, are actually very uptight about sex.

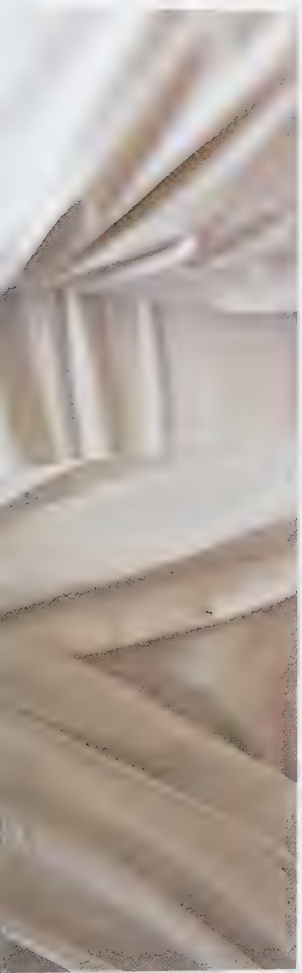


PHOTO: FLICKR.COM, BRAD SMITH

FIGS' Michal Schonbrun, the health educator and trainer dedicated to empowering women through their bodies, goes further. "We're in the Middle East, and in some ways we're very backward and Third World. Israel only pays lip service to sexual health. Because of religious and ethnic barriers and sensitivities, the establishment is not prepared to take it on. Subjects like menstruation and sexuality are taboo." An American-born woman, living in Jerusalem for four decades, noted that not one of her sabra friends ever mentioned her period. Or sex! Schonbrun says, "Women don't talk about their sexual needs; they're not taught what kind of relationships they may have, or may be good for them. Products like vaginal lubricants or sex toys are almost impossible to find in Israel." Furthermore, she says, sexual relations in Israel, like in most other Western and non-Western cultures, are conducted according to a male standard: "sex" equals male penetration and ejaculation. Women's pleasure is just assumed, or not even part of the equation.

Joanne Zack adds, with some understatement, that Israeli men are "not so in touch with their bodies." Conservative and orgasm-oriented, traditional and inhibited in their behaviors, they are nevertheless the ones who initiate what goes on in bed, where male/female stereotypes still prevail. With the additional burden of traditional Judaism—that having sex is a mitzvah, religiously ordained for *men*, primarily for the sake of procreation—there's inordinate pressure on women, secular as well as religious, to provide it, not necessarily to enjoy it.

CARETAKING IS A POWERFUL ANTI-APHRODISIAC

It comes as little surprise, then, to see an Israeli gynecologist on national TV declaring that Israeli women are "more invested in being mothers than sexual beings." "Sad," says Michal Schonbrun. "Motherhood is heavy-duty here. Women here are prepared to do anything, make any sacrifice, to have kids, but not to demand sexual satisfaction. It shouldn't be either/or."

For women who perceive themselves first and foremost as mothers and nurturers, sexologist Esther Perel, author of the best-selling *Mating in Captivity*, has another, troubling message: Caretaking is a powerful anti-aphrodisiac. Or, in the words of a JDater who'd just ended a long-term relationship: "It was suffocated by too much mothering." Naomi Raz, a FIGS psychotherapist and social worker who deals mainly with couples and their sexual issues, agrees. She sees many "caretaker types" in her practice. Israeli women, she says, are particularly imbued with what one of them called "an attitude of unstoppable giving." Their sense of responsibility for others—and a congruent sense of selflessness—starts early in life, but their appreciation of sex does not.

"Sex is about one's own pleasure, about feeling entitled," Raz emphasizes. "It's an adult playground, where we wouldn't normally go. Orgasm is a process of cutting off from doing, going to a place of being. It's a process of surrender, a changed state of consciousness." Perel refers to it as "a moment when you have an experience of major adventure, of novelty, of surprise, of mystery, of risk. A moment perhaps where you express desires in your body that you usually don't allow yourself to know."

This is hardly the experience generally presented by FIGS' clients—overextended and stressed-out Jerusalemites who, Raz says, have to fight for their sexual time. These women often have to be taught that they *deserve* good sex. Sexual arousal, or lack of it, is an issue for many. "Every woman," Raz points out, "faces arousal problems at some point. The brain is our sexual organ; it gives the signal for arousal. But it takes most women time to get there, and during that time religious [or mothering] messages from the brain can intervene."

So, how do Naomi Raz and her FIGS colleagues help their Israeli clients get over their predisposition, apparently genetic, to be nurturing rather than naughty, to love rather than lust? The

help begins, tellingly, with the group's interdisciplinary approach, research, and willingness to confront difficult questions on a personal as well as professional level.

WHEN THERAPISTS GET PERSONAL

"FIGS represents a microcosm of our culture," Michal Schonbrun answers. "Ironically, it took years until the group coalesced, till we trusted each other and felt safe enough to discuss our own sexuality and how it informs our practices. For the religious members, there are also issues of modesty (*tzni'ut*): How can we talk about our sexual lives without exposing our partners? And, like everyone else, we all suffer from psychic inhibitions. How many people—men or women—can sit around comfortably talking about masturbation?"

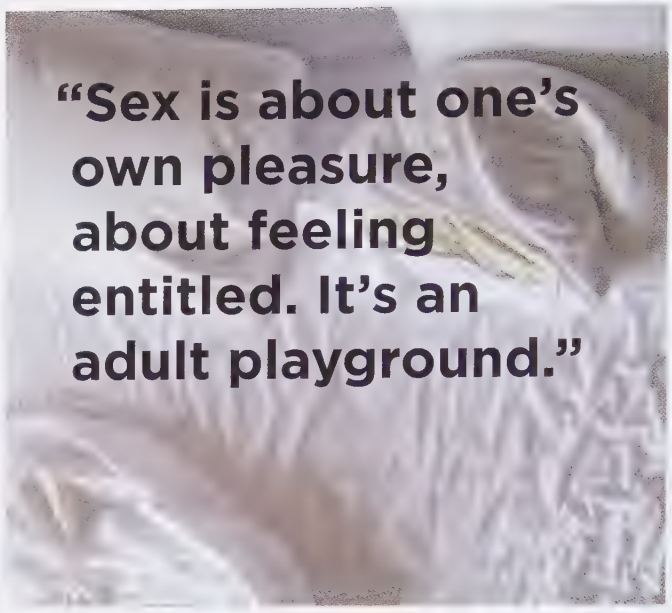
In a radical change during the past year, FIGS members have largely left their cognitive inquiries behind and turned towards the emotional and experiential, for the first time dealing as a group with the personal alongside the political and cultural. "It has been a transformation," Talli Rosenbaum declares. "We are exposed, and we process the issues together. It's a kind of readjustment of our own sexual attitudes."

Naomi Raz elaborates: "We've watched porno films together and done very intimate tantric yoga exercises, discussed our innermost lives and personal experience. It has opened us up, given us more professional tools and confidence." Consequently, when an ultra-Orthodox man stuns his modest wife by bringing her sexy lingerie, or when his desire to watch a pornographic film puts her into shock, FIGS can refer the woman to various members who are prepared to help her with wide-ranging therapies, from pre-orgasmic support groups to pelvic-floor workouts. "Many couples in the *haredi* community," Naomi Raz says, "are immature kids when they marry. They're not into pleasure. Jewish law gives them only two weeks a month for sex. So husbands pressure their wives, who recoil. They become traumatized and try to avoid turning their husbands on. You have to start at ground level with them, help them connect physically and psychologically to themselves and their own sexuality."

At another end of the spectrum she researched S&M last year with her FIGS colleague Dr. Anna Woloski-Wruble, and presented the topic to the group. "I found out that there's a whole community of S&M people who are highly functional, good members of society, and play by strict rules. This changed my preconceptions and expanded my capacity to deal with [other] things like infidelity, gay couples, and transgender clients without blinking."

ASK: "HOW ARE THINGS IN THE BEDROOM?"

Many FIGS members reiterate that the simple act of talking, both within their own meetings and in therapy, can help many women start solving their sexual problems. If, they suggest, Israel's family doctors would just ask "How are things in the bedroom?" a lot of women would be willing to confide in them—but the doctors themselves are not comfortable with the subject. Woloski-



Wruble, a nurse-midwife and certified sex counselor, teaches at Hadassah-Hebrew University's School of Nursing and coordinates the Faculty of Medicine's first mandatory course in sexuality. There, with the occasional help of her FIGS colleagues, she impresses upon medical students the need and the ways to relate to patients' sexual health. In the meantime, since few Israeli doctors bring up the issue, individuals or couples in distress—at least those who have the courage and the cash—must turn to private therapists. Enter the women of FIGS.

Not infrequently, FIGS therapists are confronted with situations peculiar to their particular setting. In more than one case, Michal Schonbrun recalls, her clients were young ultra-Orthodox women who, half a year or more after their weddings, were still virgins. "Though they'd never had 'sex', their partners had ejaculated, the sperm entered the vagina, and the women got pregnant."

The good news is that, thanks to the two "F" words—feminism and Facebook—Israeli women everywhere are much more aware now that they are entitled not just to want sex, but to enjoy it—and this consciousness is seeping into the previously closed world of the ultra-religious as well.

"The *haredi* world, with its arranged marriages, with intimacy and relationship problems and internalized homophobia, is opening itself up to deal with a lot of trauma," notes Naomi Raz. Many religious and ultra-religious women come to her treatment room in a secular neighborhood, where they feel more anonymous and therefore safer. "I've seen married women who've lived their whole lives without having an orgasm, who hate sex and haven't been able to get any help." One of her cases was a lesbian couple: an ultra-Orthodox woman with six children, one of them studying in the most extreme of *haredi* yeshivas, and her childless partner. The mother was afraid to tell the truth of her being lesbian to her children, frantic that word would get out and ruin their chances of marrying. Her partner was desperate

PHOTO: FLICKR.COM, COREY HOLMS

to have children of her own. For both of them, the struggles were internal as well as external.

FIGS members are quick to affirm that many Israeli rabbis of all stripes are willing to collaborate, to some degree, with professionals in the larger community, and with the organizations dealing with women's sexual health that have sprung up within the religious community. Tahel, Israel's first crisis center for religious women and children, was founded two decades ago; its first international conference, held in Jerusalem in December 2014, attracted 600 people, a third of them men, for three days of training on the topics of violence and abuse. Yahel Institute, established more recently, offers counseling and guidance on marital relations. Its academic program, headed by FIGS' Talli Rosenbaum, trains "marital relations instructors" in the religious sector, including bridal counselors in the Hasidic communities. "Don't call them sexologists or sex therapists," warns Yahel's founder, Michal Pins, "but rather women with guidance abilities serving as a sort of emergency/first aid station on the way to happy sexuality."

Everyone wants happy sexuality, but not everyone—whether religious or secular—agrees on its definition. Michal Schonbrun points out, "When we got The Pill more than 50 years ago, women got sexual freedom—pleasure divorced from reproduction—and were available for sex 24/7. This was a great model for men, but not necessarily for women. Do I want to have sex all the time?"

Well, Schonbrun's 20-something daughter Elisha believes that there are plenty of people who do want to have sex all the time, though exactly what kind of sex they're having remains to be seen. "Just look online," she suggests, "there are groups for sex everywhere. 'Polyamory'—that's where it's at." A Google search for Polyamory in Israel is illuminating: this is apparently the place for what, in the pre-Facebook '60s, was known as open relationships, with permutations of sex and gender now unabashedly thrown into the mix. Polyamory's home page invites newcomers to "a group for people interested in alternatives to monogamy, serious or casual, emotional or sexual." The only requirement for its meetups is to be interested in learning more.

Nevertheless, a quick survey of Polyamory's members, mostly in their 20's or 30's, reveals that most of the men check off rather staid goals like "Self-Improvement," "Communications Skills," or "Intimacy" rather than the racier suggestions on the group's list, such as "Swingers Polyamorus" (sic), Kinky, or Alternative Lifestyles (read: homosexual or other experiences off Israel's beaten sexual track). These guys are looking for a date, a relationship, or a one-night stand, not necessarily a way-out way of life. As for the women, they're almost demure in their self-descriptions: "Creative," "Independent," and "Foodie" often head their lists; the bolder ones may say that they're "Free-thinkers." Like their male peers, they are usually seeking a date or relationship, with business networking, intimacy and communication sometimes part of the bargain. Hardly the stuff of which Dana Kaplan's doctorate is made.

FIGS' Judy Shotten, the 91-year-old doyenne of Israeli sex therapists, has a clearer vision. The country's first qualified social worker, she became a media hit in her 80s after lecturing on "Sex Among the Aging" at an international conference in Tel Aviv. "I've done it all," she says, and her gleeful laugh hints that she might still be doing it. "Just stay in good health," she advises, "and keep an open mind."

From FIGS' anecdotal evidence, it would seem that most Jewish women of Jerusalem do not enjoy sex any more than their counterparts in other places—and in some cases, significantly less. But the story is far from finished. "In Israel or anywhere else," Talli Rosenbaum concludes, "the more you know about how complex and dynamic female sexuality is, the more you realize how much more there is to know. It's like learning Talmud—you're never done." ■

A freelance writer/editor/translator, Barbara Gingold lives in Jerusalem, where she also designs small urban, eco-friendly gardens.

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IN VIENNA WITH SYRIAN REFUGEES

by ROBERTA ELLIOTT

HINENI: DAY 1, VIENNA

Each person who is here in Vienna helping the Syrian refugees transit through Austria has his or her own story. Karin, a fourth-grade teacher, lives in the neighborhood of the Westbahnhof, the West Train Station, where the Catholic refugee service Caritas has set up a major assistance operation. She tells me she first started volunteering weeks ago when she couldn't sleep at night knowing that she was warm and comfortable while refugees only blocks away were cold, displaced, and in need of her help.

Tim is in charge of the food station next to the tracks where trains arrive from Lower Austria jammed full of refugees. He greets me in English through a thick German accent, glad to see me, a fellow American. Though he was born in Germany, he has fully embraced being an American: he only lived in Queens, New York, for 12 years before marrying an Austrian woman and moving to Vienna. He wants no association with anything German—except his grandparents. He is here because they hid Jews during the war, and he wants to fulfill the expectations he imagines they would have of him were they still alive. Not only does he volunteer for Caritas most days, but he has rented the apartment next to his for an Iraqi refugee and her children. "My grandparents hid Jews for years. The least I can do is put this woman up for a year while she waits for her husband to join her."

Ava is working with me this afternoon sorting clothes, because she's a nurse and conspiracy theorist. In Vienna for a month of emergency-room training at the Vienna General Hospital, she obviously cares about people, but she also believes that Kennedy

From left: A barefoot baby gets socks and new shoes at the Train of Hope shoe "store." The author sorting clothing.

was killed by the U.S. government and that 9/11 was an attack coordinated by the U.S. military to kill its own. Why? So that the U.S. could institute repressive laws to keep out foreigners. When I challenged her on this horrifying theory, she very patiently explained: "We killed our own here in Europe during World War II—humans everywhere are capable of this. You are naive to think the U.S. is not." She obviously thinks the worst of humanity and is trying to prove that not everyone—herself included—is bad.

And me, why am I here? Because it felt like a no-brainer to jump on a plane and lend a hand in any way that I could. The older I get, the more interested I seem to become in helping others. Since my adult bat mitzvah five years ago, I've instituted a custom each Shabbat during the silent Amidah prayer: I run a tally of my good deeds during the previous week. For the first two or three years, I was in pretty good shape: as a bat mitzvah project I had set up a program to visit asylum seekers at the Elizabeth, N.J. Detention Center. In those days (post 9/11) whenever someone arrived in the U.S. seeking refuge from religious, political, or any kind of persecution, rather than welcoming them, the U.S. threw them into detention at their port of entry. Our group visited them because if they had even one hour of company a week, it broke the monotony and numbness brought on by months of isolation.

Fortunately, the U.S. changed its detention policies and our visitation services were no longer necessary. So for the last few years, I've come up short every week on my Shabbat tally. Like Karin, I am blessed to live a life without want. Like Tim, I have my own Holocaust story.

In 1938, five months after the *Anschluss* (Germany's annexation of Austria), my father, age 29 and a partner with his father in a margarine factory, learned from an Austrian friend that the Engels of the Sixth District in Vienna were on the SS deportation list. As he told the story, my father, Franz Engel (later Francis Elliott), went into his room and didn't come out until he had devised an escape plan, some three weeks later. The next day his parents, his sister and he fled Vienna in the dark of night, slipping over the border to Italy, then Switzerland and France. After two years interned in an alien camp in central France, he once again collected his family, eventually shepherding them to Lisbon, where they embarked for the U.S.

I am here today to do everything I can to make sure that today's refugees are treated much better than my family was. When I tell this to Karin, a native Viennese, she blinks back tears and rolls up her sleeve to show me her goose bumps.

I am here because I need to see and believe that Vienna and the Viennese have changed. With the possible exception of my conspiracy-theorist co-worker, it has been a good start. I spent the day with people who care about people—people who have heart (both the English word "care" and "Caritas" the Catholic charity, come from the Latin for "heart"). I spent the day surrounded by Austrians of all ages who gave up their Sunday to hand out food and sort clothes. And, I got to see the never-ending line of people driving up to the Caritas donation site to contribute yet another baby onesie or boy's winter coat to the nearly unmanageable mounds of clothing already collected.

Late this afternoon, after a day of sorting infant wear—and frequently cooing at the adorable, beautiful clothes good Austrians have donated—I walked back to my rented studio, no more than a kilometer from the apartment my family fled in 1938.

I am here as their witness. To be present, to help. *Hineni.* Here I am.

For the next week, as I walk the streets my father once walked, in my own tiny way I will try to bring the Viennese refugee story full circle from 1938 to 2015.

THE CHANGING FACE OF AUSTRIA

Walking through my neighborhood in the driving rain this morning, I can't help but notice that the face of Austria has darkened several shades since the last time I was here, just three years ago. Every three stores is a kebab shop. Passing me on the sidewalk are stormy young men hurrying on their way with cigarettes dangling from their mouths and cell phones plastered to their ears. Crossing the street are young mothers in headscarves guiding baby strollers to the supermarket where they will buy delicacies from home. I am in the midst of a neighborhood densely populated by Turks. A good, solid, working-class immigrant neighborhood—the likes of which Vienna has not seen since the great Viennese migrations from the eastern part of Franz Joseph's Empire during the mid-nineteenth century.

The changing face of Austria is not only diverse; it is also young. I arrive at the Hauptbahnhof, the main railway station formerly known as the Sudbahnhof, to work the afternoon with Train of Hope, a refugee aid organization that was the brainchild of a group of young idealists with the good idea to mobilize Austrian youth on behalf of the arriving refugees. This was only several months ago. Today there are 45,000+ followers on Facebook and dozens and dozens of idealistic kids at the station chopping vegetable for salads, distributing clothing and hot drinks, submitting refugee counts to the police, and generally acting like young men and women on a mission.

I have been tasked with dishing lentils (*addas* in Arabic) onto rice for all who are hungry (no one is turned away—food is available to refugees and the city's poor alike), a blessing on this raw October day. On my left is a bearded man serving rice and proudly sporting a vest emblazoned with "Sikh Help Austria." On my right is Stephania, the Austrian-born child of refugees from Communist Romania. When I hear this, I greet her with "*Che face?*" ("What's up?" in Romanian) to her great delight, and as a reward she opens up and tells me that it has been difficult being a immigrant child growing up in Austria. "I am not a 'clean' Austrian," she says, meaning that she is not pure Austrian, but the malaprop lingers in my mind uneasily. On the other hand, she is proud of the country that took in her parents in the early 1990s and it upsets her when Americans know her country only as the birthplace of Hitler, not Mozart.

The last time I was in the Sudbahnhof was in 1990, when I

came to Vienna to write a series of articles about Russian Jewish refugees, whose first stop on their journey to the West was Vienna. From here, they were sent by train to Rome, where the United States processed their refugee applications. I remember coming to this station at nightfall and being loaded onto a train with hundreds of Jewish refugees. We rode all night through the Alps in locked cars, guarded by Austrian and then Italian troops. And although this was for their/our protection, it was a jarring experience for a sheltered reporter from the U.S.

In front of us today are other faces. I serve two women—not in burkas—from Afghanistan, a Kurd from Iraq, and countless Syrians. They have been in Vienna several days and don't seem to be headed anywhere yet. Nor have new refugees arrived since Hungary closed yet another border on Saturday night. (Unlike the U.S., Hungary has borders with multiple countries.) As a result, the refugees are in camps on Austria's southern frontier, unable to move without the seemingly slow cooperation of the Austrian national railway, which hasn't yet been able to add trains. Later in the day, a concerned Caritas official will tell me that this is very bad—Caritas has only 2,500 beds on the border, but 8,500 in Vienna. At the moment refugees in the south far outnumber the available beds.

Once the lentils are gone, my usefulness dwindles and I get itchy to return to the Westbahnhof to work with Caritas. This dreary day is vastly brightened by the welcome I get at the door from Peter, who had put me to work yesterday. Remembering my name without a prompt, he squeals, "Roberta, you're back!" This feels right, I think, and happily dive into more clothes-sorting until closing time.

Passing up the opportunity to go out with the boys (and I mean boys!) for a beer, I wearily walk home ruminating on my day. The face of Austria has changed for the better, I think. But then, I remember that there were always good Austrians, and that this is a place that cannot be so easily characterized. In 1938, before fleeing, my father hid the family's art, silver, crystal and porcelain with an honest business associate; in 1946, after the war, he retrieved it all with nary a crack or chip in any of the fragile treasures. My one regret is that I was shortsighted in my youth and allowed my father to take to his grave the name of the Austrian family that helped us, and I will never be able to thank them.

These are the thoughts going through my head as I walk through my immigrant neighborhood in the bone-chilling rain. That and a combination of gratitude and worry. Grateful that I have a warm, cozy place to return to…and worry about how the refugees on the border are surviving this dangerously unpleasant weather. Hopefully, in the next few days, we will start to see their faces in Vienna, too.

SEEING THE INDIVIDUALS

I have spent the last two days busily sorting and distributing shoes at the shoe "shop" run by the all-volunteer Train of Hope refugee-service organization at the central train station. Hidden away deep inside an unheated tent that houses men's, women's and children's clothing are shoes, lots of shoes. With the shortening of the days and the chill of the Austrian evenings, refugees certainly need warm jackets and sweaters, but the one thing people on the move need the most is a warm, comfortable pair of shoes.

Overnight, I have become a shoe expert—British sizes, European sizes, babies' shoes, women's shoes, the best shoes for little boys; you get the idea. I can look at a refugee, size him or her up by chatting in pigeon-Arabic/English and generally produce the right style and size.

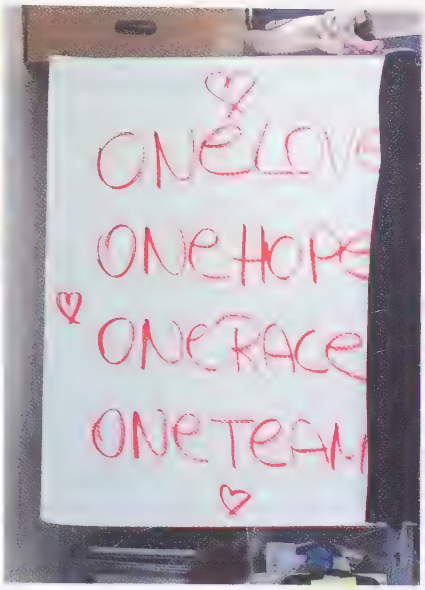
Over two days, the shoes have all become a blur (full disclosure: being a would-be fashionista, I must admit that a few do remain stuck in my mind's eye). But the last thing I want is for the people I've helped to run together in my head. So, I try to look each person in the eye and remember something about him or her. Here are some quick takes on a few of the many refugees dancing across my internal screen as I power down for the night….

Yesterday, a man came into the shoe shop, looking lost and dazed. I started chatting with him and learned that only four days earlier he had made the treacherous crossing from Turkey to Greece—only a four-hour boat ride, but the boats cannot hold their own against the angry waters. He told me with a catch in his throat that his family had arrived safely, but that he had sat helplessly watching as the rough seas washed into the boat, overcoming an infant, who died in his parent's arms.

Tonight, another man came in carrying a six-month-old baby girl, who had neither booties, socks or shoes. She was barefoot and running a slight fever. We quickly found her some baby socks and applied them in layers. When we found her a pair of baby boots that were too big, he refused them—until we convinced him that she would grow. We watched this dawn on his face as he imagined a brighter future.

Earlier in the day, an extremely fashionable young man showed up with a great pair of shoes on, but he clearly wanted something different. I was fascinated by him. In this vast sea of tired and tossed humanity, he was quite the dandy. I approached him gingerly, eager to learn his story, but afraid I'd scare him off. Though most of the refugees are Syrians, there are also Iraqis, Afghanis, and Persians. He was a Palestinian from Jerusalem who had travelled overland through Lebanon to Turkey to Greece, eventually reaching Austria, where he intended to seek asylum. I made short business of telling him I was Jewish. He grinned widely telling me that his best friend in Lebanon was Jewish (apparently this line knows no borders!). Since most Palestinians know some Hebrew, I asked him if he did. "Tuh," he clicked with his tongue (Middle Eastern for "no"). "I only know 'shalom'."

One woman stood out for her brilliant command of English. She took her fluency completely for granted, even though few around could match her. Plucky and independent, and 32 years old, she explained to me that she had lost her husband before Syria conflagrated, leaving her with three very young children. She had been on the road with them for 28 days and was headed



From left: "Sikh Help Austria" serving in a food line for refugees. A sign inside the office of Train of Hope. An Austrian train-station volunteer.

this evening to Hamburg and onward to Copenhagen. "I am bone tired, but it is worth it for my children's future," she told me with clear, strong eyes.

My favorite was a kid with low-slung jeans and an attitude who started rummaging through the women's shoes. I had already explained a million times to a million people that the women's shoes were on the left and the men's shoes straight ahead. I tried again and the kid said "I know," and continued looking for women's gym shoes. Undaunted, I kept steering him to the men's shoes. He finally got sufficiently annoyed and removed his cap as shoulder-length hair tumbled out. He turned out to be a she. She was the first real tomboy I'd ever seen in the Arab world.

The point here is that the people I've met are different from the rest of us only by experience—not by nature. They are fleeing repression and war in lands that have been torn apart by ethnic hatred—looking for a brighter future for themselves and their children. And I have seen lots and lots of children, most of them well-behaved. In fact, considering what these people have been through, each and every one of them is behaving far better than I ever would were I unfortunate enough to be in their situation.

As one of the Israeli brothers Cohen who own/run a Jewish family restaurant (they announce this as they seat you) in the Hauptbahnhof, said to me over dinner tonight: "In a month of serving refugees, we have not had one disturbance of any kind. And no matter what they've been through, they always seem to have a smile for us."

> This sorting of shoes is starting to feel repetitive. But I realize that I can't think that way—it might infect my views of the refugees themselves.

Back in the shoe "shop" after dinner, bedlam reigns: the size 40s are mixed in with the 38s; I find the right half of a pair three boxes away from its mate. Taking a page out of the Austrian playbook, I quickly try to make order from chaos. I have been doing this repetitive motion all day and it's starting to feel Sisyphean. But I realize that I don't have the luxury of thinking that way for fear it might infect my views of the refugees themselves, who are coming in a steady stream. As soon as one group is moved out another fills the vacuum. But they are not objects, they are not shoes, they are not stones we roll uphill. They are humans whose yearnings for a peaceful life are the same as our own. Sisyphus never quit, and they, too, deserve our best efforts.

ERRING ON THE SIDE OF HUMANITY

Last Saturday, most coincidentally and precisely timed to my arrival in Vienna, the right-wing powers in Budapest succeeded in closing the Hungarian border with Croatia. The results have been to halt almost entirely the flow of refugees into Vienna. Just as water always seeks its own level, the refugees shifted course and started traipsing through Slovenia towards

Austria's southernmost border. By all reports, tens of thousands have amassed there—stranded, their destinies out of their control. Today the dam broke and once again waves of humanity started pouring into Vienna.

Coming to Vienna is not necessarily good for the refugees—since most of them are heading north to Germany and Scandinavia. Vienna is not on a direct line from their starting point of Graz in the south to Salzburg, the gateway to the north. But though a detour, a way-station in Vienna is not necessarily a bad thing, either. Basically anything is better than the camps on the border, where there is standing water from the never-ending, bone-chilling rain.

The refugees began arriving by bus to the train station this afternoon at about 2:30. Initially visible a quarter mile down the tracks, they appeared spectral, wearily marching forward in single formation. As they got closer, individuals and family units gradually took shape. Within minutes, hundreds of hungry, worn-down refugees were upon us and it was our job to feed them. The menu varied by the moment, but there were always bananas and apples, bread, pretzels, cookies, and water. At times there were dates, nuts, and hot vegetable stew with rice, courtesy of two Austrian women who had cooked up a storm at home and brought a feast to serve. It smelled divine, and for a good half hour the refugees were drunk on the aroma and full bellies.

But passing out the food became a sobering and painful experience when we realized we didn't have enough to go around. I made it my business to make sure that all the children had cookies (I actually had to wrest packages from the hands of some big guys equally intent on them), and that all the babies had formula. I'm not sure I've ever been around people who have known such privation. I spoke with one woman who left Iran 21 days ago, and she told me that they were forced to walk 60 kilometers across Croatia to the Austrian border. Freezing on the train platform after only a couple of hours outdoors, I felt their pain even more acutely.

Today, I realized that one of the hardest aspects of being a refugee is to live a life totally free of autonomy. Every movement, every meal, every smoke, every pit stop is ordained by others. The last independent, self-determining move that any of them may have taken was the decision to leave everything behind, and to pack their lives into several large plastic bags for the fickle promise of a future.

I am hard-pressed to begin to understand what they have endured thus far on their journey—and that journey has only just begun. The people I have met this week abandoned their former homes and livelihoods only three to four weeks ago. This is unimaginable to me—one month ago, I was sailing on Lake Ontario, not taking an irrevocable step into the unknown!

There has been much talk in the media about ISIS sending sleeper cells among the waves of refugees. Yes, the majority of

The hot vegetable stew brought by two Austrian women smelled divine. For a good half hour the refugees had full bellies. And then we realized we didn't have enough to go around.

From left: Lives of refugees packed into large plastic bags. The author's father, then Franz Engel, in his late 20s, before he was expelled from Vienna by the Nazis. Young refugee men wait and recharge their devices at the train station.

refugees I have seen are young men—starving, weary, beaten-down young men, who have had their youth stolen from them by war and conflict. Surely, there are better, easier ways to infiltrate the West than posing as a refugee. No human being willingly chooses to give up all that is precious unless there is simply no other option. It is impossible to know this until you look into the eyes of those who have lost everything. There are no assurances, but bearing witness to this vast wave of migration has convinced me that I am much more comfortable erring on the side of humanity.

A MERCIFUL FORGETFULNESS

My trip ended as it had started—with me sorting clothes for distribution to the refugees arriving in Vienna after weeks on the road. The sorting served as suitable bookends to my week in Vienna, crossroads for the four *million* refugees bearing down on Europe in their flight from Syria, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. In between, I had distributed clothes and food, a more glamorous, and also far more stressful exposure to Europe's biggest refugee crisis since World War II.

But, after two days greeting new arrivals on the tracks, I decided I simply couldn't bear watching grown men shove women and children aside to grab food. It was too demeaning for them to have someone bear witness, so I opted for the gentler task of clothes sorting. And the quantities of clothing that needed to be divided into gender and size was seemingly infinite. As infinite as the good will that kept the Caritas donations door open and active 12 hours a day, seven days a week. No matter what time I strolled past, there were cars pulling up, packed to the roof with another Austrian family's cast-aside treasures. It was enough to restore one's faith in this Central European country with a troubled history.

During my week here, I generally had to fight to get a volunteer assignment—today, for instance, a Sunday, there were dozens of young Austrians volunteering for every form of menial labor—shlepping food and water up to the tracks; preparing bags of bread, nuts and dates in the kitchen; receiving donations; performing an initial sort, and then a secondary sort. There was a sea of volunteers ministering to a sea of the displaced—two bodies crashing up against each other, impacting one another.

If only, I kept thinking.... If only the Austrians had stood their ground against the invading Germans the way they were thankfully extended themselves for this group. Where were today's kind Austrians when my father was forced to flee in the dead of night nearly 80 years ago? How different his life and those of thousands of others would have been had Austria behaved differently then. I like to think of him watching them now, and taking some measure of comfort from their actions. What exactly would he think—my father, who traveled the world but could bring himself to return here only once in a lifetime that lasted more than 50 years after his expulsion? And what would he think of my frequent, searching trips here, especially this one to work with a new refugee population?

The situation here is ephemeral. It changes from one day to the next. People arrive, are taken care of, and leave. It is as temporary as the shoes they wear—they can mark their journey by what's on their feet. They left Syria—or Afghanistan or Persia—with one pair of shoes, and got replacements at various stations along the way, their footwear as ephemeral as the relationships they build in flight.

The other day I spent an hour with an unforgettable man in the "shoe store" at the Hauptbahnhof, as he searched and searched for a pair of boots to ward off winter's insidious cold. Try as I might, I could not produce the perfect pair. As he got more and more frustrated, I told him to come back the next day when there would be another batch of boots. Today, I was so excited when I saw him at the clothing dispensary at the Westbahnof. I ran over to him and joked about "boots," sure he would remember me. All I got back was an empty stare and a request for size 43 boots.

I must admit, I was a bit crestfallen to have been so easily forgotten when I will never forget his resilient spirit, but scolded myself afterwards. It is good that the nature of crisis is ephemeral. It is good that people move on, that relationships are only temporary, that life eventually finds permanence not here on the road. It is especially good that for most refugees this rugged migration will eventually be a distant memory as new opportunities open in new lands—especially for the children.

I know it was so for my father, who never spoke of his flight. After years of displacement, he finally settled into America, met and married my mother, got an education, established a career and had a daughter. I was never sure if he buried the experience by sheer dint of the steel will that got him out in the first place, or if he easily forgot his years in flight. I wonder if he ever thought of those who helped him along the way? I wonder if they had as much impact on him as he had on them? I suspect not. I suspect that the ephemeral nature of the journey is the saving grace that makes it bearable. It is nature's way of preserving us from losing ourselves so that we can continue to move forward.

I came here to help, and help I did. I leave here knowing that the refugees have been treated well along their way to journey's end. I will get on the plane tomorrow, warmed by the kindness I saw and the knowledge that Vienna seems to have changed since 1938. I will get on the plane, enriched by the lives I touched and which touched mine. With no regrets and with the comfort that this nightmare of theirs is transitory and that once it is over, the gratitude is contagious. ■

A retired Jewish community professional who worked at Hadassah and HIAS, Roberta Elliott volunteers, particularly with refugees. She next plans to provide humanitarian services on the Mexican border and help refugees in Greece arriving in boats from Turkey. Follow her at robertaelliottwordpress.wordpress.com.

FOR MORE ON *revisiting the cities and towns of Holocaust-survivor forebears, go to Lilith.org.*

Standing Again at Sinai, Again

JEWISH FEMINISM & TRANSGENDER JEWS

by JOY LADIN

When we think about the achievements of feminism in the US, we usually think about how feminist political activity has changed, and continues to change, the status of women. But in demanding that American Jewish communities and institutions reconsider women's place and status in them, Jewish feminists have also laid the groundwork for inclusion of transgender Jews by teaching the Jewish world to think about gender.

Marshall McLuhan said that whoever discovered water, you can bet it wasn't a fish. Before feminism, in most Jewish communities, gender was like water to fish: an invisible, omnipresent medium that permeated every aspect of Jewish identity, from family life to religious practice to social roles to institutional priorities. Jewish families and communities automatically sorted their members by gender, assigning them radically different roles, responsibilities, resources and possibilities; everywhere, Jewish tradition, ritual, liturgy and sacred texts assumed and reinforced the idea that gender divisions were a natural part of Judaism and Jewishness.

American Jewish feminists were fish who discovered water. Though their names and writings were rarely mentioned in the upstate New York Jewish world I grew up in, the work done by Judith Plaskow, Esther Broner, Rivka Haut, Alicia Ostriker and so many others prompted even our backwater congregations to think about gender rather than to assume it, and to recognize that the automatic gendered allocation of roles (the most public, of course, went to men, and the most laborious largely were given to women) was not an inherent, unchangeable aspect of synagogue life, but choices we were making every day. As women in our communities started to question those choices and work toward changing them, everyone, even those defending traditional gender roles, found themselves thinking and talking about gender—and realizing that different members of same community often had very different ideas about what it means to be a Jewish man or a Jewish woman. Feminist theory, queer theory, and gender studies were never mentioned, but as synagogue members debated whether women could be rabbis and presidents, and whether omnipresent male pronouns needed to be changed in prayer books (do we really have to buy new prayer books?) and policy statements (isn't it clear that "man" means "everyone"?), they were learning that maleness and femaleness and the language and customs that go with them are not fixed by biology or divine decree, but, like so much else in Jewish life, are subject to negotiation.

Thanks to the work of Jewish feminists, Jewish communities across the United States found ideas of gender multiplying like frogs in Pharaoh's bed. Gender divisions were becoming a source of controversy, disruption, an endless font of inequity and grievance. Many non-Orthodox congregations responded by eliminating gender distinctions in ritual, institutional roles and prayers, creating forms of Judaism and Jewishness that don't require Jews to be defined as, or to define ourselves, as male or female. (I saw how far we had come when my young son, who grew up with Sheila Peltz Weinberg as his rabbi, asked me one day if men could be rabbis too—a question that demonstrated both how much feminism had changed Judaism, and how hard it is to overcome our tendency to think of Judaism as bound up with and divided by gender.)

Thanks to feminist work, American Jews are now used to thinking about, debating and redefining gender, and developing ways of being Jewish that don't depend on gender. For transgender Jews—Jews who don't fit traditional definitions of male and female, either because our gender identities don't match the sex of our bodies, or because we don't identify as male or female at all—feminists' groundbreaking and often back-breaking work is a gift that keeps on giving.

Thanks to feminist defiance of traditional definitions of what it means to be a

Jewish woman, Jewish communities wrestling with inclusion of transgender members already know that gender is not just a matter of communal practice, but also of individual self-definition. By insisting that Jewish women need not be bound by traditional feminine gender expression—that women may come to shul in pants as in skirts or dresses, may be carpenters or insurance adjusters or stay-at-home moms, may be gay or bisexual as well as straight—feminists have prepared Jewish communities for members who don't fit communal ideas of maleness and femaleness.

Similarly, by explaining how alienating it can be for women when male pronouns are presented as universal ("The Jew is a man who..."), a practice that was once the rule in Jewish public speech, feminist thinking has prepared Jewish communities to consider how gendered language sounds and feels to transgender Jews, to understand that language that assumes that everyone is either male or female can inadvertently wound or exclude—and to translate this understanding into thoughtful revisions of liturgy, prayer, and institutional policies. Jewish feminists have shown us what assumptions and practices we need to reconsider, what policies we need to re-examine, and even what committees we need to form, when our communal understanding of gender grows. They have also taught us that in many cases we can avoid hurt feelings and extra committee meetings by eliminating gender distinctions altogether, turning our synagogues and institutions into places that are safe, respectful, equitable and inclusive for everyone, whether we identify as male, as female, or in ways that don't fit traditional terms at all.

I remember when debates inspired by feminist protest about the roles of women were dismissed as wasteful distractions, irrelevant to and disruptive of the spiritual and religious life of the Jewish people. But Jewish feminists have demonstrated that rethinking gender in Judaism can enrich our understanding of God and Torah. They've shown us that conceptualizing God in masculine terms associates God with oppressive patriarchal social systems and misogynist social practices, and thus reflects not God's nature but human nature, a form of mental idolatry that reduces the incomprehensible mystery of the Divine to narrow human terms. By shattering this idol—by demonstrating that representing God as male is a choice rather than a theological necessity—feminists have prompted liturgists and theologians to recognize and build upon the many other ways Jewish tradition represents God, including images that associate God with femaleness, such as prophetic references to God as "crying out like a woman in childbirth," and passages that portray God as beyond gender, as the disembodied Source of Creation.

Jewish communities wrestling with inclusion of trangender members already know that gender is not just a matter of communal practice, but also of individual self-definition.

But feminist challenges to the association of God with masculinity have changed more than theology and liturgy. Because Jews believe that human beings are created in the image of God, freeing our conceptions of God from the limits of human gender expands our conception of what it means to be human as well as what it means to be God.

When we insist that God is male, we define women as a lesser form of humanity, in which the image of God is blurrier, less perfectly realized, than it is in men. When we recognize that God, who existed before humanity was a glimmer in God's eye, who will still be there after the universe itself has vanished, cannot possibly be just male or female, we recognize that everyone created in God's image is also vaster, more complicated and more mysterious than any gender can encompass. And when we realize that neither God nor humanity fits within the terms of gender, we recognize that being male or female is not essential to being human, an insight that helps us see that transgender people too are created in the image of God.

When Jewish feminists began to challenge the association of God with masculinity, they demonstrated the limitations of all the readings of Torah that depend on that association, and invited all Jews to "stand again at Sinai," as the title of Judith Plaskow's ground-breaking book put it: to rethink, reinterpret and reimagine the Torah in new ways. This prompted a flood of readings highlighting the roles of women and the politics of gender in traditional Jewish texts, and inspired an extraordinary outpouring of new midrash, reimaginings of the Torah in story and song, picture and dance, that help us recognize in the Torah a dazzling array of voices, perspectives and possibilities that traditional male-centered readings marginalize, exclude and erase.

The Jewish feminist challenge to stand again at Sinai has empowered transgender Jews to re-read Torah from our own perspectives, to articulate how these ancient texts look to those who, like God, exist beyond the usual categories of male and female, and to highlight aspects of the tradition that speak to transgender experience—like the midrash that imagines that Abraham and Sarah were childless because they were neither male nor female, and that God transformed them sexually so that Sarah could become pregnant—and to create midrash of our own.

As a transgender Jew, I benefit every day from the wisdom, work and courage of Jewish feminists. Without them, the idea of a Jewish world that welcomes all Jews, regardless of gender identity and expression, would seem like a Messianic dream. Thanks to them, in congregations and communities across the U.S., that dream is beginning to come true. ■

Joy Ladin, Gottesman Professor of English at Yeshiva University, is the author of National Jewish Book Award finalist Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders. *A former Lilith cover girl, she has spoken and published widely on Jewish and transgender identity. www.joyladin.com.*

In the Ethiopian Orphanage

by SUSAN SILVERMAN

In Addis Ababa to adopt a brother for her two daughters, Aliza and Hallel, Rabbi Susan Silverman describes meeting for the first time the boy—birth name Daniel—she and her husband, Yosef Abramowitz, are calling Adar.

My sister Jodyne and I got to our room after five in the morning, and fell into deep sleep, facing each other across the lush king-sized bed. The rabbis teach that throughout the encampments around Mount Sinai, the night before making their covenant with God, the Israelites slept a deep, unconscious sleep. God wanted them to go straight from bed to receive the Torah—the original come-as-you-are party—with their analytical skills still dozing, so that the experience was unmediated by what another Jewish guy, centuries later, would call superego. I hoped I could release my own self-consciousness when I approached the orphanage and met my son for the first time.

Even before the wake-up call from the front desk, Jody and I simultaneously opened our eyes with a start. "I hear the train *a-comin'*..." Jody started to sing. Johnny Cash was our theme music.

"Everything will be alright, right?" I asked my sister, suddenly serious.

"Oh, Sooz," Jodyne said with a squeeze on my arm. "We'll love him immediately."

"What about Yosef and the girls. They're okay, right?" I had a scene in my head. Two shoppers at Whole Foods, both acquaintances of ours, talking in the aisle. Piles of organic produce in their carts. Starbucks mugs in the cup-holders. *Can you imagine? Her whole family killed here in Newton at the same moment she's meeting their new son in Ethiopia....Just terrible.*

On our way to the parking lot to meet Samuel, our driver, Jody gasped and pointed up to our left. What we thought in the early dawn light to be lush, green rolling hills spattered with lovely white villas was really a painted mural—a three-story billboard blocking the mass of gray, dilapidated shanties spread far and wide behind it. As we drove through the gate, I saw a man with only one leg sitting in the dirt. Rain began to fall, as if the sky could not be such a bright blue over this misery. I reached to the back seat for Jody's hand.

There were no stoplights or crosswalks. Pedestrians, drivers, cows, donkeys and goats all aggressively negotiated their way through streets and intersections. I closed my eyes as we sped toward whatever happened to be crossing the road in front of us, wanting also to shut out the terrifying randomness of it all.

"The streets no have names," Samuel explained as he pulled to the side of the road. "This is the right neighborhood, but now we must find the street." He called out to two adolescent boys for directions. They smiled broadly and tried out their English: "Hello, Hello!" One climbed into the front seat with me, the other in the back with Jody, who laughed at their unfiltered exuberance. They directed Samuel with words and gestures, occasionally turning to me and Jody to say, "America, America," or, "America good." They laughed and elbowed each other, and got out of the car on a quiet street in front of a high, rusty fence. Samuel beeped the horn, puncturing the quiet, and a man with white hair, who looked to be in his sixties, in gray trousers and a blue and gray sweater, slid open the wide, heavy gate. There before us was the African Cradle Children's Center.

My whole life had led to this place. Yet, I didn't even know how to open the car door, or how to greet these exuberant children. I was awed by their smiles and voices, their beckoning. I was afraid Samuel wouldn't come back to get us, and I'd be stuck at the orphanage forever. I was terrified that I wouldn't love my son. Or even recognize him. I imagined myself standing there, dressed like Mrs.

The author and Adar.

Banks, the mother in Mary Poppins: a nineteenth-century lady with a large white hat, ruffled blouse and billowing skirt. "Such dear orphans, poor things. I shall pat them each on the head." I would look around frantically, unable to discern one brown child from another, my claim as a mother exposed: white American economic privilege.

Hiking up my loose cotton dress, I mounted the two-foot stone platform that ran the length of the front wall. How obvious is it that I'm accustomed to proper stairs and doors and countless other comforts? How vain was I to imagine everyone in that compound analyzing my every move? I was the epitome of writer Anne Lamott's twin phrases: "a narcissist with an inferiority complex" and "the piece of shit around which the world revolves."

Okay, Susan. Stop. Breathe. Get out of your own head. I was about to live the story I would tell and re-tell my growing son. When I first laid eyes on you I knew … God brought us together? You were mine? I was a fraud?

A smiling woman opened the door before I could knock. She was holding a baby girl swaddled in a ruffled pink fleece onesie. "Hallo," she said. "I am Fitsum. I take care of the children here."

I smiled back. "I'm Susan," I said, trying to convey perfect-motherness. Joyful yet calm. Enthusiastic yet composed.

Narcissistic yet insecure.

I peered beyond her into the orphanage. The room was spotless, lined with white cribs. A toddler played on a woven rug in the center of the room with a woman who handed her plastic shapes. As we smiled awkwardly at each other Fitsum made no move to allow me through the rusted doorway. Why wasn't she showing me in, leading me to Adar? Was I supposed to greet her in a specific way? Was I missing a customary saying or gesture that would let me into the inner sanctum, past these aching moments, to be with the son I had kept in my heart and would now finally hold in my arms? His soft cheeks, the feel of his breath, the weight of his body in my arms were so close that the magnetic force—the invisible tug that reached across an ocean and drew me to this one doorway, the way God brought the Israelites from slavery to Sinai—cast an irresistible pull. Why wasn't she letting me get by?

Finally Fitsum raised the child in her arms toward me. "This is your baby," she said, just this side of bemused.

"But…" I looked in confusion at the baby, all in pink.

Then I took in his face, the slight uplift of his eyebrows forming a peak above his nose, the "o" of his lips as he solemnly studied my face.

Adar.

I could feel Jody stifling a smirk behind me as I took my baby into my arms. Adar

I smiled back. "I'm Susan," I said, trying to convey perfect-motherness. Joyful yet calm. Enthusiastic yet composed. Narcissistic yet insecure.

or, perhaps, still Daniel, twisted his body away from me and reached for Fitsum. Her eyes, like his, were shiny black and watery. Then Adar turned to me, and I kissed his forehead. He smelled like sour milk. His skin was covered in red bumps. He looked at me weirdly.

Who was I? A person alienated by my own child's smell! Xenophobes—*racists*—talk about "others" in olfactory terms, and here I was already looking forward to transforming my own son with a warm, sudsy bath in the refuge of the hotel, in the opulence of the Addis Ababa Sheraton, where orphans and poverty would be relegated to the more comfortable realm of theory. Where I could call Yosef and hear him say that everything was okay. I wondered if the hotel room had cable; I could use an American sitcom before bed. Fran Drescher's Nanny assuring the three motherless children that, yes, their father pays her to take care of them, but she loves them from her heart.

Fitsum led us into the large, open room. Jody and I glanced around. A baby around Adar's age stood at the end of a crib and reached out to us. A toddler on the floor banged a plastic ball in my direction. At the back wall, beside the last crib, three women sat at a low children's table on small plastic chairs like the ones at Hallel's preschool. They had brown skin and wore clean, light-blue housecoats over dresses, their black hair pulled back into buns. With a spoon or bottle in one hand and a child in the other arm, they fed their charges with expert efficiency and soothing words. Seeing that they were not covered in baby food or struggling to keep the children still made me feel even more inadequate. The Israelites may have received the Torah in a guileless, rubbing-the-sleep-from-their-eyes state, but I received my son with self-consciousness—more guarded and awkward in my actions before these caregivers than the Israelites were before God. Pointing at me while looking into Adar's face, Fitsum said, "Mama, Mama," and slowly backed away. Adar whimpered and scrunched his brows in deep concern. My heart was breaking along with his. And with hers. "I had a baby boy at the same time Daniel was brought in," Fitsum would later tell me. "My son was my baby at night, but Daniel was my baby in the day."

Fitsum would be the closest person to a birth mother for Adar we would ever know—the woman who held, cared for and loved him for his first nine months, starting just days after the police had found him, a newborn alone on an Addis Ababa street. No other information about him had been known or recorded. Had he been wrapped in a blanket? Placed in a basket?

Jody patted Adar's back. I steadied myself with a hand on hers. Thank God she had come to Ethiopia with me.

"What if this *isn't* Adar?" I whispered, even though I knew it was. I had carried his photos for eight months, since the day the agency sent them to us when he was a couple of months old. I could have described each picture from memory: the angle of his lips (a range from knowingly crooked smile to pursed to casually parted), the intensity of his eyes, the arch of his eyebrows ("It's

cute that you're jingling those bells, but I'll smile for you in any case").

"This baby is pretty like a girl," I said, turning him to face Jody.

"It's him, Sooz. Don't worry."

I looked at him face-to-face and said, baby-voiced, "We're gonna make sure *you* have a penis."

"Your first words to your son," Jody said dreamily. "Should I write them in his baby book?"

Adar raised his eyebrows curiously at me in the Photo No. 4 "Oh, please" expression as we laid him on the large braided rug in the center of the room. I tried to look nonchalant, and non-pedophile, as I pulled open the waistband of his fleecy pink pants and peeked under the frayed cloth diaper with the bent safety pins. I wanted to be overjoyed, full of love, completely surrendered to the covenantal moment, but instead I was nervously checking for a penis.

"This is the first uncircumcised penis I've ever seen," I whispered to my sister. "Well, sober."

I picked up my baby and kissed him. Amid all the suffering I had seen—just in our drive from the hotel to the orphanage—how could I be silly and joking? I should be railing at God, reaching a new low of shaken faith, embracing my father's lifelong theology: *If there's a God, He's an asshole.* I had lived my life in terror of the kind of loss that surrounded me now like the sea: dead parents, dead children. But for the first time in my whole life no voice in my head negotiated with God. No begging voices clamored to bargain or fight for anything, or demand that a capricious Ruler pay attention. I simply engaged in my end of the deal with the Creator-of-the-World in this one country, this one neighborhood, this one building and with this one boy, to make a little order. Throughout my life and then eventually through my Jewish education that, frankly, started only in rabbinical school, I had alternately rebuked and implored God, despaired of and celebrated tradition, lorded my own righteousness over some teachings and stood in humility and even shame before the vastness and depth

The children now (from left): Adar, Hallel, Aliza, Zamir and Ashira.

of the tradition. But now, my sister, my new son, the caregivers and the children in this orphanage with me comprised a microcosm of love, tragedy, hope, apathy, brokenness and healing—the shattered and the whole—the promise of Sinai.

And in it I wasn't God's judge or God's bitch. I was God's partner.

Jody crinkled her nose. I took Adar over to the changing table and pulled his soft little legs out of his pants. I worried that I was overstepping by helping myself

I tried to look nonchalant. "This is the first uncircumcised penis I've ever seen," I whispered to my sister.

to the facilities without asking permission but, with the language barrier, neither did I want to seem like I was telling a caregiver to change him for me. I unfastened the safety pins and removed the rag that served as a diaper. There was a basket on my left that had a few other soiled items in it, and I threw this one in too. Fitsum came over, took a fresh rag, dipped it in the bucket of water to my right, and handed it to me. For a moment, we both held the same threadbare cloth, and exchanged a smile.

As I cleaned the extreme mess, which seemed to indicate some sort of parasite in Adar's body, I saw how red, rashed and raw he was. Despite the sores, he didn't cry at my touch. I cleaned him slowly and gently, looking into his eyes and repeating his old and new names, *Dani*, *Adar*, *Dani*, *Adar*, using just a corner of the rag before rinsing it in the increasingly dirty bucket of water. I kissed his forehead, cheeks and tummy, freshly diapered. I picked him up just as a woman came over with a baby about Adar's age. I handed Adar to Jody and took the baby from the woman, who seemed a little surprised, but I was on a roll—I'd help out. This baby, too, was covered in sores. I dipped a fresh rag into the same water bucket and, stifling gags from the mess in her diaper, cleaned her up. Adari's dirty diaper hadn't bothered me at all, I realized with satisfaction. My covenant was with him. He was my son.

Finished, I turned to Adar and we took each other in. He arched his eyebrows and granted me a half smile as I spoke my first baby-book-worthy words to him, a phrase oft repeated in my family.

"You are mine forever."■

Rabbi Susan Silverman is an author, teacher and activist.

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The Making of a Viking Jewess

by NINA LICHTENSTEIN

"So, are you going to stay Jewish?" the woman in Starbucks asks. *Holy crap, is it possible she thinks I divorced my identity?* A wave of indignation mixed with frustration flushes through me. I am in my late forties, and I have been Jewish since, at the age of 23, I immersed in a mikvah to complete my Orthodox conversion a few weeks before I married my Jewish boyfriend.

Before I respond to her, I breathe. I swallow. *Be kind. Don't get emotional* I tell myself. "Sure I'll stay Jewish," I begin, "it's not like that's a switch you can just turn off." I think I even manage a smile. She smiles back at me. "He's *meshuge* to have divorced you for her, and a *shiksa* to boot! I will tell him so if I run into him!" I cringe. You are so lacking boundaries I think, but I say, "Oh, please don't. It's OK, things happen for a reason. And besides, she is good to our kids and they like her." The woman scoffs, and steps up to place her order.

My Jewish identity was not threatened by my recent divorce as much as was my

ART BY JESSICA DEUTSCH, *JESSICATDEUTSCH.COM*

emotional well-being. While falling asleep at night, I would entertain elaborate fantasies. *I can have a partner who will sing "Eyshet Chayil" for me on Friday nights! I could move to Israel and finally become fluent in Hebrew! Or become the writer I had always wanted to be by moving to, say, Maine. I could move back to Norway….*

My experience with my extended Jewish family had lasted for nearly 25 years before my marriage ended. My ex-in-law family was an unusual Jewish clan—a loud, fun-loving, tight-knit group of right-wing, N.R.A.-supporting, worried Jewish germaphobes. To them, family was everything, and they protected it—as well as their property—from intruders and strangers with love, dedication and overprotective fervor. My ex-mother-in-law was not your run-of-the-mill *Yiddishe mame*, because this matriarch carried a .38 in her handbag and could swear like a trooper. Nor was my father-in-law your every day *zaydie*; he did 100 push-ups and 100 pull-ups in his basement every morning before 5 AM, and on his days off he'd be packing a Smith & Wesson in a leather holster, driving a tractor in his fields while smoking cigars. Their greatest enemy, after public schools and their "liberal brain-washing agendas," was the ubiquitous germ in all its imaginable permutations. Despite their eccentricities, I grew to love them deeply.

It must have been a shock to them when, in the summer of 1985, I—the braless, Scandinavian, nationally programmed socialist that I was at 19—introduced myself with a firm, confident handshake. I was 5'10" tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed, outspoken and independent, and I had decorated my handbag with peace signs, a pink women's liberation fist, and reminders to "Party Naked!" My guess is they privately hyperventilated, and I don't mean in the same way their son had when we first met.

I was just about to finish a year in the U.S. as an au pair when we met at the camp resort where my host family and I were spending Memorial Day weekend. He was super-tall, with a dark complexion and a gregarious personality; to me he was both exotic and intriguing. Not to mention fun. We were married three eventful years later.

> My birth-tribe was stoic, cool-headed, Lutheran/agnostic northerners who found the expressiveness of more "exotic" tribes to be exaggerated drama.

It was clear early on in our courtship that the fact I was not Jewish posed a major problem for my boyfriend's family. I remember tears and sobs over long distance phone calls once I returned to my native Norway at the end of the summer. "Religion doesn't matter," I would attempt. "It's that we love each other that is important!" But listening to my boyfriend enumerate his parent's arguments and concerns, I soon learned about the perpetual concept of ensuring Jewish continuity. I realized that the Jewish identity of a Jewish family could be shaken to the core by the prospect of a non-Jewish daughter-in-law.

Coming from a typical Norwegian Lutheran—but mostly agnostic—family whose main religion was *carpe diem*, enjoying life and long summer nights on our huge wooden boat on the northern fjords, I approached the matter pragmatically. I told him, "If it takes my becoming Jewish for us to be together, I will do it, rather than live my life without you." And so what had begun for me as a gap-year experience between high school and university launched a trajectory that would lead me far from home into a life of diaspora, of living in between countries, cultures, families and languages. My parents never once tried to dissuade me. In fact, they encouraged me to fly back to the States to explore the relationship, lest I live my life regretting what could have been. Yet when my dad walked me down the aisle to the huppah in the Orthodox synagogue where my wedding took place, wearing a *kippah* for the first time in his life, with a violinist in the background playing "Sunrise, Sunset," he tightened his grip around my arm and whispered, "If you don't like it, you can always convert back." Little did he know. Once a Jew, always a Jew.

My early gifts from my mother in-law-to-be—Howard Fast's *The Jews: Story of a People* and Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*—were but the seeds of what became an interest in earnest. Although not practicing Orthodox Jews, my boyfriend's family belonged to a small Orthodox shul where a large number of the members were Holocaust survivors and their families, many chicken and dairy farmers originally from Poland. After their rabbi turned me away from conversion the requisite three times, I was accepted as his student, with the caveat that I also enroll in Jewish Studies classes at the university. My readings had prepared me for this "dance of admittance." Much harder was when, after studying with him for two years and finally presenting myself to the *Vaad HaRabbonim* (official Orthodox rabbinic committee) of Boston for conversion, they rejected my candidacy. Since I did not readily agree to go to Israel for a year to continue my studies in a yeshiva for women, as they demanded, they feared I was not truly committed to Judaism, but more to my boyfriend.

Thankfully, persistence paid off. After another year of regular classes, both in the rabbi's study and at the university, I finally became a full-fledged member of the tribe. It must have helped that, while in Oslo for a semester as my grandmother lay dying, I was admitted to join the conversion group at the synagogue there, one known for its strict Orthodox guidelines. Finally, on an early fall day in 1988, dressed in a modest below-the-knee skirt and a white Laura Ashley blouse, I sat in front of three rabbis and answered their questions. What were my feelings about Christmas trees, and about henceforth calling Abraham and Sarah my *real* parents? Was I ready to observe Shabbat and kashrut even if it might complicate my relationship with my family? I remember feeling nervous but holding my own. This was just the beginning of my Jewish life,

I told them. I intended to keep learning and developing as a Jew. They liked that. I dunked in the mikvah while the rabbis stood behind a screen, and as I said my blessings and noticed how surreal the moment felt, they pronounced their "*amens*" at the sound of the splashing water. With that, and my soon completed degree in Jewish Studies, I had evolved to become a Kosher Viking Jewess. I was adding some welcome material to the gene pool, eventually raising robust Jewish children with a proud Norwegian heritage, and observing Shabbat and holidays. I even used the *mikveh* for monthly immersions; it was a wholesome deal, and the continuity issue seemed resolved.

Our three sons attended an Orthodox Jewish day school from nursery through 8th grade, and learned to *layn* and *daven* and get by in Modern Hebrew. But they also appreciate their Norwegian heritage. They speak Norwegian, are citizens of Norway, will break out and rap in Norwegian as they tote Viking necklaces interlaced with their Stars of David and *chais*. My husband and I wanted them grounded in both traditions, giving them Thor, Balder and Odin for middle names, and they seem to appreciate the richness of belonging in more places than one. Hopefully, as adults, they will also want to pass their Norwegian heritage on to their children.

Although not observant by any Orthodox standards, my mother in-law taught me by meticulous example not only how to make the clearest chicken soup, the fluffiest matzo balls and the most tender brisket, but also how to prepare the Passover seder, and make the High Holidays meaningful. With me, she gained a third daughter, one who was eager to learn, asking many questions along the way. Soon they went from being kosher-style to kosher, and when I converted they offered me an inscribed *siddur* thanking me for having enriched their Jewish lives.

Whether it was unique to the in-laws' brand of compulsions, or more about their discomfort when it came to anything to do with "strangers"—germs included—their fear of many lurking dangers meant that the in-law family lived in an environment defined by language and habits reflecting all the worst-case scenarios that might compromise the clan. I was part of this hyper-vigilant kinfolk for close to 30 years, and I had to work hard at times to not let osmosis influence my own attitude too much. After all, my birth-tribe was stoic, cool-headed northerners who found the expressiveness of more "exotic" tribes to be exaggerated drama, and at times plain overwhelming. Over time, I acquired certain mannerisms and ideas that were not high on my parents' list of things they admired. I interrupted, complained more openly, obsessed about the minutiae of kashrut and Shabbat and argued adamantly for freedom of public religious expression. I would challenge my parents about their view of the world, and I introduced them to rabbinic thoughts and Jewish philosophy. To help cope with the occasional incongruities of opinions, I would make light of all the *meshugas*, the in-laws' and mine, although I also realized my own sense of self was morphing as the years passed. For me, it was a package deal: in order to be a member of their tribe, I bought in lock, stock and barrel.

Twenty-five years went by while my husband and I lived a comfortable suburban life in a relatively diverse community teeming with Jewish life. Twenty-nine synagogues of all affiliations, a bustling JCC, a kosher market and Judaica store, and a public school system that never would question its Jewish students for taking off for any Jewish holidays, great or small. We agreed about making the investment and sacrifices that necessarily come along with the desire to instill a strong sense of Jewish identity in our offspring.

After all the observant practices I had taken on in my life as a Jew—including an Orthodox conversion and wedding, as well as the many daily, weekly, and life-cycle rituals which I loved and that were all very prescribed—I wanted a formal, Jewish termination to our marriage. My ex-husband had no objection. Deciding to divorce after much deliberation—and to divorce in this way—felt like the most independent decision I had ever made, and was critical to my self-definition.

Soon after we had performed the *gett* divorce ceremony in our rabbi's study, with the three bearded, ultra-Orthodox rabbis who had driven up from New York City to be witnesses, I was reminded of the increasingly narrow stance the rabbinate of Israel was taking on the kinds of U.S. conversions they accepted. Watching as the bent-over scribe fished out the tattered feathered quill and tiny plastic inkwell from the inside pocket of his black coat, his thin, pale and ink-stained fingers running across the smooth, lined parchment paper spelling out my Hebrew name—*Naomi bat Avraham ve'Sarah*—I remembered my first conversion rejection in Boston. Everything that had happened in between seemed to flash before my eyes. My marriage and my carefully built Jewish family unit would no longer be what defined me. But I did still have my own Jewish self and my three Jewish sons to move forward with me into the world.

With my Jewish identity in the forefront of my consciousness, the next week I composed a letter to the Rabbinic Council of America, the arbiters of the strictest Orthodox Judaism. I wanted them to re-issue my conversion certificate, since I knew that the *Beit Din* (rabbinic court) of Hartford that originally converted me had been comprised of three aging rabbis from a generation of Modern Orthodox rabbis known for their (relative) leniency. Embarking on this new chapter in my life, post-divorce, I wanted to re-affirm my commitment to Judaism and at the same time minimize the chances that I or my sons might have our Jewish identities questioned should we chose to make *aliyah* or marry in Israel. Although it felt humiliating having to "prove" to someone, yet again, how Jewish I had become and how Jewishly I had thus far lived my life, I breathed through it. And I wrote my heart out. *Hineini*—here I am, I told them.

The new conversion certificate arrived in the mail a few weeks later. ■

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LA POUSSETTE

a short story by RACHEL HALL

SYLVIE BEAUCHARD HAS BEEN COOKING SINCE DAWN. Her in-laws will be here shortly, so despite her fatigue, she is brisk in the dining room, snapping down the linens and cutlery. The wine glasses she places carefully by the plates. The green stems make her think of tulips and she wishes she had some for a vase. It is too early for flowers and besides, she chides herself, she has what she has most wished for.

She has planned the exact way to tell Charles' parents about their grandchild. Charles has agreed to her plan, though he'd prefer to tell them straight away. After the meal, Sylvie will suggest the front room for dessert. (The hazelnut torte is indeed the reason for rising before dawn. It has layers and filling and a frosting made glossy and smooth by her hand.) Once seated, she will take out her knitting—a tiny sweater in the palest blue. How long before they notice what she is making? With her father-in-law it could be hours. He'll start in with news of the Occupied Zone, then move on to the price of petrol in Nîmes, but Mother will notice. She will raise her eyebrows, gather her lips, a look Sylvie finds fearsome, though it is Mother's most common expression. She will demand to know what Sylvie is doing and why. And then they can tell her, watch her impatience and annoyance turn to pleasure, maybe even pride, who knows? But Sylvie has gotten ahead of herself. There is still work to be done before they arrive.

From the window over her sink, Sylvie can see the tenants in the next farm over out in the orchards. It had pleased her

ILLUSTRATION BY HILA PELEG

at first to think of the farm being inhabited again. Then she saw the tenants in town with their city clothes and manners. The woman's skirt had pleats in the back that flipped up when she walked. They weren't farmers, she thought then, and sure enough, Charles had found their cow in his pasture. When he took it back he'd found them reading books. Books about farming! Who knew such a thing existed? Were there also books about walking? he'd asked Sylvie. Taking a leak in the woods? That was weeks ago, and still Sylvie will hear him laughing in the other room.

And now, here he is, stomping his feet outside the door to get the dirt off them as she has taught him.

"The wine," she says when he is in.

"Yes, yes."

He is not one to be rushed, Sylvie knows, but he wants the dinner to go well, too. A son would make his life easier, but Sylvie cannot help herself; she wants a girl.

"I'm hungry," he says. "It is ready?"

He's been up for hours too. Outside the dogs—Sammi and Bruno—bark their excited welcome. They are good dogs, loyal and affectionate, fine company when Charles is gone. Over the barking she can hear the truck sputter and grind on its ascent. Sylvie tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. There isn't time to change into a fresh apron. Pity.

"*Bienvenue!*" Sylvie calls to her in-laws, "Come in!"

"Please," Mother Beauchard says, "I'm not the Queen, just an old woman." She pecks Charles on each cheek. Her fingers grip Sylvie's shoulders as she pulls her in for her kisses. There is nothing frail in her touch.

"Where is Papa?" Charles asks, taking her coat and kerchief.

"With your beasts," she says. "He brought them bones."

"He's sweet on those two," Charles says.

"Just two more mouths to feed, that's all they are," Mother says.

Sylvie knows where this conversation is going: they spoil the dogs, treat them like children. If they had children they'd see how foolish they look.

"That yarn is lovely," Sylvie says, reaching for Mother's arm in a new sweater.

"I traded plenty for the wool," Mother says.

"A good color on you."

Mother says nothing, but Sylvie can tell she is pleased. She puffs up like the tawny *poule* before she lays.

Father Beauchard has been drinking already. He's mild and affectionate when he drinks, no trouble. He might grow mushy at their news, but that isn't a crime, no not at all.

"Father," she says kissing him. She smells the wine on his breath—warm and briney against her cheek.

"Shall we sit down?"

"Yes, please."

"Such fuss for family," Mother says, taking in the tablecloth, the good glasses.

"Never mind," says Father, "never mind."

Charles tries to catch her eye. He'd like to blurt their news, to stave off his mother's relentless crabbing, but Sylvie won't look. She must get the roast from the stovetop where it cools. The juices will make a tasty gravy, thickened just a bit with flour, a touch of wine. And then the dogs are barking again.

"Such a nuisance," Mother says, smug, her opinion confirmed.

There is a rap at the door and through the kitchen window, Sylvie sees it is the neighbors. At this time? Everywhere families are sitting down to Sunday supper. Father is liable to invite them in, tell them the history of this house, the village. His favorite is the story about their region being the model for Heaven, such is its charm. Between her mother-in-law's sourness and this interruption, Sylvie's high hopes for the day plummet.

She opens the door. "*Oui?*" Two men stand before her, their round spectacles making their eyes look particularly inquisitive. With them is the woman in her pleated skirt. This time she has a baby carriage with her, and in the carriage, a little girl with wispy dark curls, the kind Sylvie would like to smooth with her hand. Sharply, the child turns her head from Sylvie's gaze.

The child buries her face in the woman's shoulder. In the past, such a display would've pained Sylvie.

"Good afternoon," the taller man says. His dark hair is brushed back from a high forehead. "We're your neighbors." Sylvie catches a whiff of something foreign in his speech.

"*Oui*," Sylvie says again.

"We were hoping to speak with you regarding—"

But then Father Beauchard is calling from the other room, "Come in! *Bienvenue*!" Sylvie opens the door wider, so they can all enter. The shorter man lifts the carriage over the stone threshold, and then the child is removed. She goes to the woman, tugs on her skirt to be lifted. Once on her hip, she buries her face in the woman's shoulder. In the past, such a display would've pained Sylvie.

"We've interrupted you," the woman says, seeing the table. "We'll not bother you long."

"No bother, no bother," says Charles.

"We must inquire," says the shorter man. "If you have any food you would sell. You see, the farm isn't yet producing."

"No," says Sylvie, before Charles can answer. She wants them to leave *tout de suite* so she can resume her cooking, proceed to the announcement, the celebratory cake. She tries to usher the neighbors towards the door again. She sees that during this interruption, the potatoes have boiled over, leaving starchy ribbons down the side of the big pot.

"Potatoes," says the woman.

"For the pigs," Sylvie says.

"Would you consider for the child?" Lise says. "She is growing."

The child has round cheeks, legs like sausages. Even her fin-

gers are pudgy. Is she pale? Perhaps, but it is that time of year. The child stares at her, her dark eyes appraising, it seems.

"We must take care of our own," Sylvie says, averting her eyes.

"You know about the market on Tuesday?" Charles says. "Some will barter there."

Sylvie watches the woman return the child to her stroller. It's a stylish little *poussette* with big wheels, a navy awning and seat with a sturdy basket beneath. She has seen these only in magazines. And though there are no sidewalks or gardens or parks in which to push a *poussette*, Sylvie must have it. Why should this baby have one and not hers?

"Wait," she says. "I've forgotten the barley." Neither she nor Charles care for it. But these people can't be choosy, even with their fancy ways.

"For the *poussette*," she says, "a hundred kilos."

"Ridiculous," says Mother Beauchard.

The child is being lifted out, her fat little legs kicking. From under the seat, a blanket is removed. "*Et voilà*," says the shorter of the men.

"What do you need with that?" Mother Beauchard says.

Sylvie doesn't care what Mother thinks. She steers the *poussette* past her frowning mother-in-law, out of the kitchen smelling of burnt meat and into the front parlor.

Charles has brought up the barley. The men each lift a burlap sack, hoist it on their shoulders, and take off down the hill.

"I'll bring the rest around after *midi*," Charles says.

"Well," says Father Beauchard, "Where were we?"

"Mother," Sylvie says, cupping her belly, "have you not guessed it? We are having a child."

"Bravo!" says her father-in-law. "Congratulations to the both of you—and to us as well—a grandchild!"

When Sylvie looks to Mother Beauchard, she sees that she is smiling. Is it possible that her eyes are wet? Later, Sylvie will remember this door opening between them, approval like a light shining on her. This hadn't been her plan, but it has worked out. Even the meat is fine, not over-cooked as she feared. They eat well, sopping up the juices with the crusty bread and nearly polishing off the cake.

LISE HASN'T SEEN SUCH PLENTY SINCE BEFORE THE war. There'd been a fat, golden loaf on the breadboard, meat crackling in the oven, a cake with chocolate frosting, hazelnuts circling the top. She had expected the woman to offer some to Eugenie. How long since the child has had a sweet? Where Lise is from, guests are a blessing. They are ushered in, fed the last morsel, given the best seat at the table.

But Palestine seems not just far away to her; it is from another time, some distant past. There is so much here that her parents would dislike or misunderstand—the young couples walking arm in arm, Lise's own calf-baring skirts, the crisp greetings in the shops and offices down town.

March 13, 1941
Très chers,

At present, we are living in the Vaucluse region. The farm has cherry orchards and almond trees already established and we have planted potatoes and wheat. Until then, we have barley, which our neighbors grow in abundance. Besides crops, we have chickens and a cow, so we have milk for the child and cheese and butter. Eugenie delights in the open space here and grows like a mushroom.

Kisses to all of you, from all of us.
Lise

Of barley, one can say this: it is versatile. Lise makes porridge with it for breakfast. She roasts the kernels and makes a kind of coffee. Adding the first scraggly vegetables and wild garlic, she makes soup. She grinds it into flour and makes bread and cake, adding cherries from the orchard once they ripen. They don't go hungry, but she will never eat barley again after the war. Just the smell of it cooking will turn her stomach.

Lise makes porridge with it for breakfast. She roasts the kernels for a kind of coffee. She grinds it into flour and makes bread and cake. She will never eat barley again after the war.

By June, Alain and Jean have mapped the property and cleared a spot for planes to land. What they will bring or take away—food? Ammunitions? People? Her brother and husband speak of this after supper while she cleans, puts Eugenie to bed. So often, she thinks, since the war began, she can do nothing about what most troubles her. She can't bear not to act either, so she cleans the crumbling stone floor, tidies the shelves. This activity both occupies and distracts, though not indefinitely, not perfectly.

Sometimes she knits while they talk, counting stitches, rows. She hears them, but doesn't. This is the other discovery she makes during this time—the mind can know and not, hold apart certain facts where they aren't as bothersome.

She is making a cardigan for Eugenie from wool that was a sweater of Jean's before he tore the sleeve on a fence. It's rough yarn, too scratchy for a child, but it will keep out the cold. Eugenie is a good girl, as if she knows she mustn't complain. What will be the cost of all this early and necessary compliance, Lise wonders. There is too much to do for Lise to consider this long. And then her brother is gone to Lyon where he does God knows what. Each time he returns she is afraid it will be the last time she sees him. He and Jean speak late into the night, and she cannot bear their murmurs.

WHEN IT HAPPENS, CHARLES HAS GONE TO THE MILL in Avignon. Sylvie is in the pantry gathering ingredients for a tart when a cramp seizes her, a knife so sharp that she clutches that place she knows only as down there. Through the layers of dress and apron, she feels the dampness. It's too early for this. Pas encore, she whispers, as if hushing a baby back to sleep. Pas encore. She cannot remember when she last felt the baby moving inside her—was it last night? This morning before the milking? Then she can think of nothing but the hot, rude pain.

When Charles returns, it is over. The blood and mess have been disposed of, the floor mopped clean. He comes home smelling of wheat and wine and is slow to understand when Sylvie tells him the baby is gone.

As soon as he entered, the doctor gave Sylvie a tablet to swallow. She would like to sleep for a long time, but after the examination, the doctor insists on talking to her. Charles, in his muddy work boots, stands by the bed. When he leaves, there will be two discrete piles of dirt on the bedroom floor.

"The womb," the doctor says, "is a vessel." He picks up the glass beside the bed to illustrate. "Yours is tilted, Madame. Like this."

Sylvie turns her head into the pillow. The bedding smells sour to her.

"You must accept, Madame."

Sylvie can hear Charles shuffling, grinding the dirt into her floor. So much mess, she thinks.

"I recommend rest," the doctor says, "and quiet."

"Yes, yes, of course," Charles says.

Sylvie keeps her face in the pillow even after she hears the door click shut behind them. She hears their voices in the next room, but their words seem not to adhere one to another. Then it is quiet. A breeze comes through the open window.

How many days pass in this manner? Tea and bread, then sleep. Soup and more sleep. One day after the bleeding has at last stopped, she feels well enough to sit up and knit, but the discovery of the small yellow bonnet, nearly completed on her needles, sets her back. Should she unravel all her hard work? The yarn is good cotton, but what to do with it, she cannot imagine. She sets it on the pillow, lies down. Then from the window, happy shrieking, peals of laughter. It's the girl with the dark curls. Sylvie rises and goes to the window. She can see the child running from one of the men, laughing. The man sings as he scoops her up and she shrieks again. Sylvie shuts the window, pulls closed the curtain. Still the noise seeps in: piercing, ruinous. She knows what she must do. Hasn't the doctor insisted on quiet?

At Hôtel de Ville, Sylvie is made timid by all the movement, the brisk efficiency of high heels clacking over the tiled floor and the voices echoing up into the high ceiling. The entry way smells of rain and cigarettes. Thank goodness there is a placard by the entrance. What will she say to Monsieur Gilbert? How does she know they are Jews? Their speech, the dark hair, spectacles—don't Jews always have poor eyesight?

As it turns out, she needn't have proof. Any suspicion is sufficient. Monsieur Gilbert thanks her and moves her quickly along. He'd rather spend his time practicing *boule* than worrying about Jews, but there is pressure from Paris. Still, he thinks, he will play his match after lunch as he intended, before sending out the gendarmes.

MID-MORNING, WHILE LISE KNITS, THERE IS A KNOCK at the door. This could be any number of things—the cow in the neighbors' field again, or a peddler, but Lise knows it is something more. She watches Jean at the door, combing his hair back with his hand as he listens. The man who has been sent to warn them is no one she knows, but that is to be expected. "You must hurry," he says. Before the door is closed, she is gathering their things—clothes, books, papers. A sack of barley cakes and the first almonds from the trees. They're on a train to Lyon before dark.

August 12, 1941

Bien chers tous,

By the time you read this, we will be in our new town. Alain promises it is a good place. Jean will find work in a lab. Alain assures of this as well. I imagine there will be parks for Eugenie with paths we can wander.

She stops writing for a moment, remembering the stroller. Is it growing easier, this leaving and discarding? She cannot even remember all she has left or abandoned, so it's funny that she will remember the stroller for a long time. Beside her, Eugenie sleeps, her cloth doll in her arms. Lise leans her forehead against the glass. In the last light, the fields outside gleam. She must finish her letter, so she can post it at the next station.

Perhaps when you read this, we will be sitting down to supper in our new apartment. Think of us there—safe and together and missing you.

Lise

WHEN CHARLES MENTIONS THE NEIGHBORS' SUDDEN departure, Sylvie shrugs, continues her polishing. She tells no one what she has done—not Charles or her in-laws. Several times that warm fall when she opens the windows, she imagines she hears the girl calling out or singing. But no, it's only the wind sifting through the leaves on the larch trees, and farther off, Charles cutting hay.

The baby carriage and the layette of gowns and sweaters she'd assembled were taken away while she convalesced. For this, Sylvie is grateful. The dogs are gone, too, and though she doesn't ask about them, for a long time she will expect their sharp, energetic barks, the frantic swinging of their tails as she moves about the yard. ■

Rachel Hall's short stories and essays have been published in numerous literary journals and anthologies. "La Poussette" is part of her collection of linked stories, Heirlooms, *selected by Marge Piercy for the G.S. Sharat Chandra Book Prize.* Heirlooms *will be published in fall 2016 by BkMk Press.*

Intimate Violence in Two New Israeli Novels

Two novels by prolific, award-winning Israeli authors that consider the intimacy of violence have now been released in the US. **Dalya Bilu** has masterfully translated both books, capturing the dreamy, impressionistic writing of ***The Sound of Our Steps*** by **Ronit Matalon** (Metropolitan Books, $35) and the chatty, deceptively casual first-person narration in ***Lies, First Person*** by **Gail Hareven** (Open Letter, $15.95).

The Sound of Our Steps is an enthralling autobiographical novel that recreates the insular environment of Matalon's childhood in a resettlement town in the 1950s and 60s. Built on a scaffold of short, associative chapters, the book weaves through time and multiple perspectives to illuminate the lives of an Egyptian immigrant family that has been dropped into the alien landscape of Israel.

At the novel's heart stands Lucette, abandoned by her husband and supporting three children on her job as a cleaning woman. A former beauty, she has been coarsened by her work and circumstances and emerged as the force that both attracts and repels those around her. Always at risk of flying into an unpredictable rage, Lucette vainly attempts to impose order on her chaotic and uprooted life through the violence she directs at her children and on the shack in which they live. Constantly reorganizing furniture and walls, trying to plant roses in the inhospitable dirt, angry at any mess, Lucette is nevertheless the source of stability for her children, especially the youngest, most often referred to as "the child," who watches and records the small, intimate moments of family life that define her youth.

Although the novel never strays far from its tight focus on the family, it tells a larger story about loss and displacement: Lucette, who never masters Hebrew, has been irreparably changed by her immigration, and Maurice, her immoral and wayward but charming husband, cannot let go of his former identity as a fully integrated Jewish Arab in Egypt. It's in Israel, dominated by Ashkenazi "Ben-Gurionists," as he calls them, that he feels alienated, driven to leave the country to escape the second-class status that so humiliates him.

Set almost entirely in Jerusalem, *Lies, First Person*, reveals a different Israel. A compelling meditation on obsession and evil, the book moves from the light of Paradise into shadowy noir. In fact, Elinor Brandeis, the protagonist and narrator, describes her life—comfortable, middle class, married to a good man, two successful grown sons—as the Garden of Eden. Which means, of course, that a serpent is bound to slither in.

The obvious snake here is Aaron Gotthilf, a relative of Elinor's father who came to the family's run-down hotel when Elinor and her sister, Elisheva, were teenagers in order to write a book—*Hitler, First Person*—that would ultimately destroy his reputation and career. In the process, he sexually violated and dehumanized sweet and slightly developmentally delayed Elisheva, and then arranged an abortion after impregnating her.

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This whole sordid past—including their parents' dysfunctional responses: first disbelief, then their mother's suicide by way of heart medication and their father's exit to Italy with one of the hotel's visitors—rears its head when Gotthilf returns to Jerusalem as part of a tour of repentance, in which he publicly renounces his book. But not his own sins.

The novel is remarkable for what it insinuates as much as for what it says. After many years, Elinor reunites with Elisheva, who has moved to Illinois and become a devout Christian, which allows the novel to juxtapose both the flat landscape of the American Midwest, which hides nothing, with the hills and crevasses of Jerusalem, where secrets and tensions germinate, as well as measuring the Christian ideal of forgiveness against Jewish notions of justice and the demands of history. Although Elisheva has come to terms with her past, Elinor cannot follow suit. Consumed by the need for vengeance, she descends into the pits of mad obsession, and, like Gotthilf before her, comes to enact the very evil she attempts to stamp out.

The reader is left with some doubt, though. After all, in a book called *Lies, First Person*, the first one we doubt is the narrator herself. And while the novel plays with narrative, offering different versions of events only to retract them in favor of more "truthful" tellings, the entire edifice crumbles under the weight of its own testimony. Like the best noir films, we are taken into the dark labyrinth of a person's mind, so when the sun finally shines at the end, we can't tell if all has been illuminated or if we've been blinded by the sudden light.

MICHAL LEMBERGER *is the author of* After Abel and Other Stories. *She lives in Los Angeles.*

Literature, Loneliness and the Urban Landscape

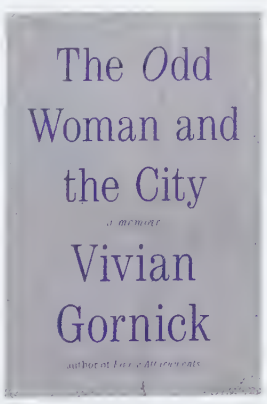
I read ***The Odd Woman and the City*** (FSG, $22), the new memoir by essayist and critic **Vivian Gornick**, while pushing my double stroller through the streets of Jerusalem in the August heat, trying to walk my toddler twins to sleep.

"Nothing draws us closer to one another than the degree to which we face our deepest shame openly in one another's company."

Structured as a sequence of dialogues, vignettes, memories, and observations, Gornick's latest offering captures both herself and her city, evoking the eeriness that pervaded New York City in the wake of 9/11, the stalwart patience of the men in line at the soup kitchen in her neighborhood, her conversations with strangers sitting one table over in the coffee shops where she sits and writes. As I read about her exchanges with beggars, loners, shopkeepers, and bus drivers—quotidian interactions which often take a surprisingly profound turn—I was transported back to Gornick's New York, but also to the city of Thomas Wolfe, Charles Reznikoff, and Evelyn Scott, whose work she brings to life in this insightful, penetrating survey of literature, loneliness, and the urban landscape.

Gornick's 20 years of friendship with her gay friend Leonard, also a solitary New Yorker, form the backbone of the book, serving as a springboard for her reflections on friendship and intimacy. She contrasts their friendship with the famous but short-lived literary partnership between Wordsworth and Coleridge, drawn to one another because they felt like their own best selves in each other's presence. "Today we do not look to see, much less affirm, our best selves in one another. To the contrary, it is the openness with which we admit to our emotional incapacities—the fear, the anger, the humiliation—that excites contemporary bonds of friendship. Nothing draws us closer to one another than the degree to which we face our deepest shame openly in one another's company."

Gornick makes us her intimate in no small part because of what she is prepared to confess to us on the page. In exposing the city, she exposes herself, not in the long form of autobiography but in Wordsworthian spots of time. We become privy to the melancholy of her Chekhovian childhood, in which her mother lay on a couch in a darkened room, lamenting her loneliness to anyone who would listen; the men she mistakenly and briefly married; the urgency she felt upon turning 60. In paging through her memories, I was suddenly awash with one of my own—I recalled how I felt my own heart pulsing in her prose when I was back in high school, studying alone in the library and coming across this paragraph from Approaching Eye Level—reproduced in this memoir—on her principled renunciation of romantic love: "As the years went on, I saw that romantic love was injected like dye into the nervous system of my emotions, laced through the entire fabric of longing, fantasy, and sentiment. It haunted the psyche, was an ache in the bones… it hurt the eyes to look directly into its influence… I have prized my hardened heart—I have prized it all these years—but the loss of romantic love can still tear at it." I handed my daughter her water bottle and thought about how puerile it all seemed to me now that romantic love has been eclipsed by hunger, by helplessness, by the love we cannot help but shower on those to whom we are everything.



Eventually my girls fell asleep, and I could stop pushing the stroller and sit down on a park bench to read. I was immersed in Gornick's conversations with derelicts and doormen when an older woman tapped me on the shoulder and told me to turn my stroller around—the sun was on my sleeping daughters' legs, and I should not let them burn. "If you've grown up in New York," Gornick writes, "your life is an archaeology not of structures, but of voices, also piled one on top of another, also not really replacing one another." They are too much in the sun, I thought, and I would finish the page and then turn them around, reminded of the many differences between New York and Jerusalem.

ILANA KURSHAN *works in book publishing in Jerusalem.*

Loving—Then Leaving—Hasidic Life

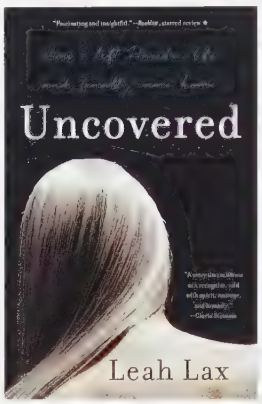
As a child growing up Reform in suburban Texas, **Leah Lax**—then known as Lisa—seemed poised for the familiar rites of passage: college, boyfriend, job, and marriage. But the profound dysfunction in her own family—mental illness, drug addiction—made her foundation shaky, and she found herself increasingly drawn to the Lubavitcher Hasidic community, and the ordered life within its confines. She describes all of this—and much more—in her memoir ***Uncovered: How I Left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home*** (She Writes Press, $16.95).

By the time she was 19, Lax had entered into an arranged marriage and soon gave birth to her first child. In the next three decades, Lax bore six more children and remained cloistered within the highly circumscribed structure of her community—she covered her hair, kept strictly kosher, went to the mikvah, abstained from watching television or reading secular books.

As her memoir makes clear, she genuinely loved both family and faith, but as the years progressed she found the life she had chosen less a shelter and more of

a prison: "Choking, heart racing, clock face glowing an ungodly hour. I pant and try to orient myself. Breathe…Breathe it all in: loneliness, and children's laughter…*Breathe* in the constrictions in my life and the simmering resentments, but it all stacks up inside my chest. My chest burns; my throat is tight."

Lax had to dig deep to find the strength to break free. She enrolled in college, dared to exchange her *frum* skirt for a pair of jeans, and began to write. And she was eventually able to admit the feelings of attraction she'd had for other women, feelings she had done her best to extinguish or ignore. Though her husband and children were shocked by her choices, she managed to remain close to them. Lax's gifts—uncommon intelligence, a poetic sensibility, an eye skilled at discerning the telling detail—make her story lyrical, ruminative and profound; she is able to impart the events of her life with a spiritual glow that shimmers long after the last page has been turned.



Another new memoir, ***Here and There: Leaving Hasidism, Keeping My Family*** by **Chaya Deitsch** (Schocken Books, $26) echoes Lax's in some key ways, but, unlike Lax, Deitsch was born into a Hasidic family. Though deeply observant, Deitsch's family in New Haven, Connecticut, was less cocooned than many of its kind. She describes a childhood in which she and her sisters were permitted to eat Hershey's Kisses, and Carvel ice cream cones. The family's television was not hidden, but kept right out in the open, and she was allowed to watch "everything from Captain Kangaroo to Valley of the Dolls." Her reading was never censored. And markedly unlike Lax, Deitsch came from a close-knit, loving and supportive clan.

Yet even as a child, she knew that she could not follow the program that life in such a family ordained. Sitting in the kitchen with her beloved aunts, she eagerly drank in the conversation that touched on "family history, novels, dieting, movie stars, decorating, child-rearing, fashion…." But when she tried to imagine herself as an adult "magically transported into their circle, a bright scarf tied around my adult head, nursing my mug of Nescafé," she could not. Instead, all she could see was "blankness."

It was this failure of vision that drove Deitsch to lead a quietly subversive life, outwardly obeying the rules while always with an eye on the exit. Taken under the wing of a renegade teacher, she applied to Barnard College and was accepted. Though her decision caused much angst to her parents, they agreed to let her go—even though they foresaw what such a decision meant. Their daughter's life would not hew to the template; she would swim in more expansive waters than they would ever know. Deitsch earned a B.A. from Barnard, an M.A. from Columbia, and is now a financial writer. This moving, tender account of her journey demonstrates how she has kept family close to her heart—even as she chose to move further and further away.

With the profound dysfunction in her own family—mental illness, drug addiction—she found herself increasingly drawn to the Lubavitcher community.

YONA ZELDIS MCDONOUGH *is Lilith's Fiction Editor. Her seventh novel,* The House on Primrose Pond, *will be out in February 2016.*

A Love Triangle at the Seminary

The Beautiful Possible (Harper Perennial, $15.99), by first-time novelist **Amy Gottlieb**, opens in Berlin, 1939, but quickly moves to New York City and Westchester County, New York, where most of the action will unfold. It traces the story of Rosalie Wachs, who is drawn to both Sol Kerem, who will become her studious rabbi husband, and to Walter Westhaus, who washes ashore smelling of the spice market in India to which he had escaped after his father and fiancée were killed by the Nazis.

Ostensibly about the love triangle that develops among the three while Sol studies at Manhattan's Jewish Theological Seminary—and lasts the rest of their lives—the novel is really a study of the restrictions that bind Rosalie and her struggle to loosen them. The two men get their narratives, but in truth they never amount to more than projections—or to use the mystical terms of the novel, emanations of her desires. On the one hand lie stability of family and adherence to a Jewish life, and, on the other, sexual passion and intellectual voraciousness. Rosalie is the real revelation here: fiercely intelligent but boxed in by the expectations of her time and place.

The Beautiful Possible is always engaging, its story sure to resonate with many readers. Its greatest strengths lie in its ability to capture the essence of the religious life without any preciousness and its use the rabbinic device of *she'elah* and *tshuvah*—question and answer—in order to examine and attempt to resolve the tensions between Jewish law and the sometimes contradictory, often mysterious, workings of the human heart.

M.L.

On Writing a Jewish Book

If you had asked me almost 10 years ago, when I was starting out as a PhD student in English literature, what I planned to focus on for the next decade or so, the answer would have been, easily, women's literature. Not memoir, not comics. Most certainly not Jewish women's comics.

Of course, if you'd asked for a list of my favorite writers, the ones who had the strongest influence on me, it would have included, somewhere closest to the top, Anzia Yezierska, Grace Paley, Susan Sontag and Vivian Gornick.

Those are all Jewish women, you might have pointed out.

Oh? I guess...I mean, *Susan Sontag*? Does it count if she wouldn't have wanted it to?

Somewhere between my upbringing in a Modern Orthodox Jewish day school in the Bronx, and the years of slowly replacing that orthodoxy with new modes of belief and practice—feminism, writing, literature and, yes, yoga—I decided that my Jewish history would never figure, could never figure, in my life as it—as I—had been remade. It would certainly never become a centerpiece.

And then, somehow, it did.

At first it was a bit of a hobby, a distraction on the sly. I started to dig deeper into the lives and works of these women whose characters seemed, somehow, against all odds, familiar. Sara Smolinsky? She, and her inventor, Anzia Yezierska, were nothing like my grandmothers, who immigrated half a century after and had never gone to college. What could they have in common besides that excessive, emotional language, those yiddishisms?

Grace Paley's "Faith"? She was nothing like my mother, who fled Brooklyn as quickly as possible without once looking back. I mean, sure, they're both mothers, and both grappled with their own tangled relationships to their immigrant parents. But what else did they have in common?

And what did any of these women have to do with me?

In many English Literature programs, delving into Jewish literature is not a particularly advisable turn. "You'll be marginalized," my mentor warned me when I told her about my plans to write on Jewish literature, though of course she was also the very person whose turn back to her Jewish roots had prompted my own. "Triply marginalized," she said when, later, I added women and comics to the fold. "But if it draws you, then that's what you should write about."

Explaining this shift to my family, my friends, and my colleagues, was maybe the hardest part. I had spent a lot of time reveling in my rejection of everything Jewish: complaining about the rampant homophobia of the rabbis (with exceptions, of course) who'd been charged with my early education, deriding the *kol isha* ruling that, at 14, had halted my burgeoning singing career in its tracks. Every time a person dressed in Hasidic garb and holding a *lulav* and *etrog* stopped me on a Brooklyn street corner, asking, hopefully, "Are you Jewish?," I would respond with an adamant, "No," adding, under my breath, I'm certainly not your kind of Jewish.

In academia, as everyone knows, you're not supposed to research for personal reasons, and it quickly became apparent that writing about this literature, about Jewish women's identity, was clearly a way for me to work out a lifelong puzzle. What does it mean to be Jewish without belief? And what does it mean to be a Jewish woman, when every bad memory I had from childhood was somehow tied to my supposed roles as a future Jewish American Princess, not to say Jewish wife and mother?

Writing about a Jewish topic also meant transforming myself into the very worst thing you could become as a graduate student: unmarketable. I was now too Jewish for English Literature programs, and I would never be Jewish enough for jobs in Jewish programs. This left me, as usual, between worlds; if you write your first book on a Jewish topic, after all, you've pigeonholed yourself: you're a Jewish writer. Haven't you seen how so many of those popular "canonical" Jewish writers (and actors, and painters, and critics) reject that title? Write about something else; take the word Jewish out of your title, for heaven's sake!

While I still admit to a heavy dose of cynicism when it comes to almost all modes of exposing and expressing my Jewish self—we've let our synagogue membership go, having attended only one service (very briefly), and my husband and I actively considered adopting a Christmas tree this year, despite our both having been raised Jewish and despite the hours of therapy both our mothers' reactions will cost us—there is something, dare I say, cathartic about this embrace of what I once so forcefully rejected. At a certain point, there comes a time when everyone has to face the fact that her career choices are, well, personal. This isn't to say that, for example, all oncologists grow up having witnessed loved one's lost battles in the face of cancer, or that television personalities emerge from childhoods spent being silenced, far from the spotlight. But it is inevitable that, if we take a close enough look, the paths that have led us to where we are, however winding, can be traced back to early burgeoning moments, even deeply disguised ones. The scholar of medieval history will, perhaps, be the first to admit this; it's those of us who feel most naked in researching and writing who we are, where we come from, that are the most active concealers, the most adamant deniers.

Why did I write a Jewish book? Because I was trying to reclaim my Jewish self, however unfamiliar its now ragged shape. ■

TAHNEER OKSMAN *is assistant professor and director of the academic writing program at Mœarymount Manhattan College. Her book* "How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?": Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs *is out from Columbia University Press in February.*

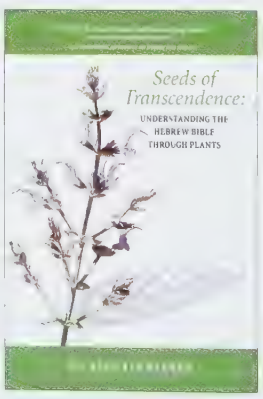
Our Agricultural Past, Our Spiritual Future

With *Seeds of Transcendence: Understanding the Hebrew Bible through Plants*, **Jo Ann Gardner** has exceeded any standard compendium of plants of the Bible. Ambitiously crafted as a commentary, Gardner's book (Decalogue Books, $29.95) explicates the cycle of yearly readings in the Hebrew Bible, including the history and significance of the plants along the way. She is familiar with commentaries of modern scholars, Talmudic opinions and midrash, along with modern research on biblical plants.

Plant life was an important part of the background that ancient readers (or hearers) would have understood. At one point Abraham plants a tamarisk tree; an ancient would have recognized this as an act of piety. In the story of Rachel and Leah, we might have expected Rachel to become pregnant after using fertility-enhancing mandrakes. But it is Leah—who does not use the remedy—who becomes pregnant. The mandrakes' "failure" in this case teaches the story's theological point, which is that God is in control of Rachel's fertility.

Plant life was an important part of the background that ancient readers (or hearers) would have understood.

In addition to explicating the literary or theological significance of numerous plants, fruits and trees, Gardner also tackles the contextual importance of the change of seasons, the cycles of planting and harvest, and the contrasts between the different environments appearing in the Bible: Egypt, the Wilderness and the ancient Land of Israel.



Besides minor errors (watermelons were not yet pink in the days of the Pharaohs), Gardner's overall approach is erudite and memorable. It is one thing to recall the flashy plants like the pomegranates and grapes which appear in most biblical descriptions of the Land of Israel. But in Gardner's book we also learn about hyssop (a symbol of humility, as compared to the lofty cedar), the caper (known for its resilience), and the broom bush (Elijah's shelter in the wilderness).

As a commentary in itself, Gardner's work makes some interesting original points, but the book seems unable to make up its mind whether it is a modern commentary (incorporating the idea that the text of the Bible has a long history, derived from different sources), or to take a traditionalist approach (which assumes, e.g., that King David wrote all the psalms, or that the original audience for the agricultural laws was really the Israelites in the wilderness—who as yet had no context for understanding them). In some ways, the book acknowledges modern premises, but notably fails to incorporate some basic knowledge about Israelite history and religion—for example, our historical evolution from Abrahamic allegiance to a family god, through Israelite henotheism (worship of only one, but acknowledging the existence of others), on the way to Jewish monotheism.

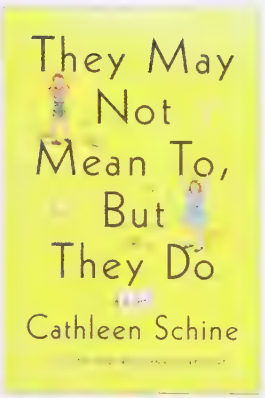
However, despite its inconsistency as a biblical commentary, *Seeds of Transcendence* is a valuable botanical companion to the weekly readings. Until recently, Jews had a reputation (given that in recent history we were predominantly city-dwellers) of being out of touch with nature. This book—in tune with the agricultural awakening in modern Israel, and the increase of Jewish involvement in environmental movements and gardening—succeeds in conveying a fundamental message: Biblical references to plants, seasons and the land are not just a relic of our agricultural past, but are deeply entwined in the religious message of our sacred texts, and our spiritual future.

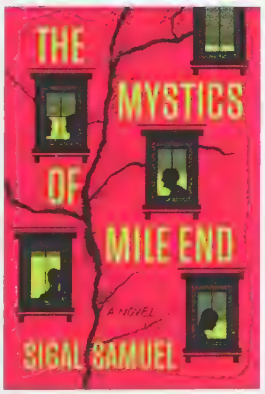
CHANA THOMPSON SHOR *is a Conservative rabbi, the first woman* mesader gittin *(preparer of Jewish religious divorce), a Judaic fabric artist, and a writer.*

Three New Novels on Family, on Betrayal, on Mystery

They May Not Mean To, But They Do (FSG, $26) by **Cathleen Schine** takes its title from a Philip Larkin poem: "They fuck you up your mum and dad / They may not mean to, but they do." This hilarious yet deeply affecting novel chronicles the intergenerational ties among the members of the Bergman clan—aging matriarch Joy, who refuses to retire from her museum job and insists on single-handedly caring for her beloved but ailing husband, Aaron, in their rent-controlled Manhattan apartment; their children, Molly and Daniel, who have families and careers of their own—she on the other side of the country in L.A. and he on the other side of town; and her grandchildren, Aaron's preteen daughters Ruby and Cora and Molly's aimless but well-intentioned grownup son Ben, who bartends while trying to pass the Bar.

When Aaron passes away, Molly and Daniel try to alleviate Joy's loneliness by inviting her into their lives, but they fail to realize that it's her own life that Joy needs to learn to embrace more fully. Joy strikes up a relationship with an old flame, Karl, whom she insists on inviting to the family's Passover seder. In perhaps the novel's most entertaining scene, Karl walks in, Daniel and Molly gape, and Ruby quotes knowingly from Chabad.org about the commandment "to feed and give drink to the poor and the embittered." But the most moving relationship in this novel is a surprising bond that develops between Joy and grandson Ben, who moves in with her when he can no longer afford his rent and she cannot abide her loneliness. "She





enjoyed living with Ben. [He] was never there. He went to work during the day and to class in the evening. At night, he was out until the wee hours. Joy saw traces of him, reassuring traces. A mug in the sink. An empty carton of milk put back in the refrigerator." Ultimately it is Ben who shows Joy that she still has a place in the world and is back on the "road to relevance" even if she must accept that she will never be granted her wish that "everyone could be old together." With its unexpected moments of profundity and laugh-aloud humor, Cathleen Schine's novel movingly demonstrates how parents and children may not mean to but they do, ultimately, strain yet sustain one another.

Orphan #8 by **Kim van Alkemade** (William Morrow, $14.99) is a historical novel set partially in 1919, where four-year-old Rachel Rabinowitz witnesses the tragic dissolution of her parents' marriage and is placed in the Hebrew Infant Home, an orphanage in New York City. Alternating chapters of the novel are set 40 years later, when Rachel works as a hospice nurse in the old Hebrew Home and finds herself tending to Dr. Mildred Solomon, the doctor who performed an experimental course of x-ray treatments on her as a child, with both immediate and long-term harmful medical repercussions. One arc of the novel follows Rachel as she is subjected to brutal treatment both by her caretakers and by her cruel and unforgiving peers at the orphanage, while the other traces Rachel's growing realization of the full implications of her childhood torment. Van Alkemade's novel is ambitious in scope, at times to its detriment—the novel would have seemed less contrived if not for the present-day arc, which also charts Rachel's struggles as a lesbian in the 1950s, her wily determination to become beautiful at all cost, and the loss of her brother, who abandons her to create a new life for himself in the nascent State of Israel. Still, van Alkemade succeeds in bringing to light a fascinating and little-known chapter of history—the story is based on real medical experiments performed by a woman doctor in a Jewish orphanage located on Amsterdam Avenue until it was demolished in the 1950s—and she vividly chronicles her heroine's pain, resilience and capacity to be honest with those who loved her, with those who betrayed her, and ultimately with herself.

The Mystics of Mile End (William Morrow, $15.99) by **Sigal Samuel** plays off the ancient rabbinic legend about four sages who entered the *Pardes*, the mystical orchard. In this case, three of the four are members of the Meyer family in Montreal's Mile End neighborhood, where Hasids and hipsters live side by side. The Meyers are neither—the widowed father, David, is a professor of Jewish mysticism who turned away from religious Judaism when his wife passed away tragically; the daughter, Samara, decides at age 13 that she wants to have a Bat Mitzvah and begins studying with her Hebrew school teacher Mr. Glassman; and the son, Lev, is a lonely 11-year-old whose only friends are the eccentric Hasid Mr. Katz, who seeks to reconstruct the biblical Tree of Life in his backyard, and Alex, another misfit, who claims to be the son of a great Russian scientist and spends his free time trying to contact astronauts in search of extraterrestrial life—a search that parallels the religious explorations of the other characters.

After the first quarter of the book, the novel flashes forward 10 years, to David's stroke and gradual heart failure. Each of the characters experiences a religious turn: David believes he can hear his heart murmur, and that his heart is whispering mystical secrets; Lev becomes an Orthodox Jew who studies in yeshiva; and Samara loses interest in religion and lives with her lesbian college roommate, until she gets the religion bug again and decides she will climb the "Tree of Life," moving from one Kabbalistic sphere to another as she increasingly loses touch with reality. The novel explores the fluidity of religious identity in the modern world and the pull of family ties, but its themes are more ambitious than the author's craft can sustain, and ultimately it is not the full-grown tree of a novel but the author's seeds of ideas that are most compelling—a Holocaust survivor who reunites with his lover by dialing the number on his arm, which she has made her telephone number; a list of words that don't exist but should; the good intentions of those who comfort the dead with endless casseroles, such that, as David recalls, "my sharpest memory from that period was of a pile of Tupperware containers that overflowed the fridge and mounted on the kitchen counter—a kindness that took up too much space, intruded on our grief." The most beautifully written passages in this book are generally the stories within the stories, particularly those narrated by Mr. Glassman, the only mystic of Mile End whose hold proves sufficiently enduring to root this novel in the soil of its readers' hearts.

I.K.

MORE: *author interviews and book news at Lilith.org/blog.*

James McDonald and his daughter Barbara with Golda Meir (far left) in Tel-Aviv, August 27, 1948.

A Voice Among the Silent

Shuli Eshel, a filmmaker whose subjects have been Israeli women soldiers, female athletes, and Israeli and Palestinian women in the forefront of the peace process, now focuses on a little-known Holocaust rescuer. James McDonald (1886–1964), son of Catholic immigrants, was League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and worked tirelessly to find safe havens for refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. He repeatedly warned world leaders—including FDR and the future Pope Pius XII—of the looming tragedy and was later appointed by President Truman as the first U.S. Ambassador to Israel. "Voice Among the Silent: The Legacy of James G. McDonald" documents aspects of his story from his meticulous diaries, discovered in 2003. Eshel notes, "McDonald's bravery is a model for human decency and courage as relevant today as it was 80 years ago." On public television and on DVD. *avoiceamongthesilent.com*

Mikveh, a Ritual Repurposed

Reclaiming mikveh—Jewish ritual bath—as a powerful tool for marking life events for women and men, and for all kinds of transitions (a big birthday or anniversary, ending a period of mourning, before giving birth, finishing a period of chemotherapy, starting a new job) is a trend that has picked up momentum over the past decades. A new pluralistic Jewish feminist organization in New York City, ImmerseNYC, facilitates individual ritual experiences at the mikveh. It also aims to model a diverse community where Jews support one another through life transitions with love and authenticity. It's part of the growing movement of mikvehs around the world which reimagine how this ancient practice can serve people in broader ways. *immersenyc.org*

Sacred Rights, Sacred Song: A Concert of Concern

"I was too young for the civil disobedience of the secular '60s, but I want to sing my way through the civil disobedience of the sacred '70s (as in the Jewish calendar 5770s)," says Israeli-American activist and musician Francine Gordon. Her "Concert of Concern" is a performance with orchestra and narration. Its original music aims to raise awareness of the work of activists in Israel to ensure the healthy modern Jewish democracy envisioned by its founders. *sacredrightssacredsong.org*

First Letters from Survivors

Researchers at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem are studying the first dispatches sent by Holocaust survivors in the days and months after the concentration camps were liberated. They wrote to tell loved ones they were alive. "These letters bring us their first personal voice," said Iael Nidam-Orvieto, leader of the project and director of Yad Vashem's International Institute for Holocaust Research. "They give us an intense glance at the way survivors felt and thought about themselves, their situation, and their future exactly at the time of liberation. We've never had that before." A book of these remarkable communiqués is planned for the coming year. *YadVashem.org*

Katherine Janus Kahn's illustration in *A Family Haggadah*.

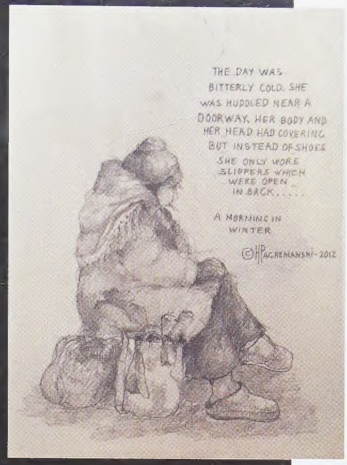
A Family Haggadah at 30

In 1975, Judye Groner and Madeline Wikler, founders of the pioneering publishing venture Kar-Ben, wrote and published *My Very Own Haggadah* for young children, which spawned requests for a haggadah for older children and their families. Educator Shoshana Silberman responded with *A Family Haggadah*, first published in 1986, which used gender-neutral language, included the story of Miriam and described "Four Children" instead of "Four Sons." This Haggadah has Hebrew prayers and songs, English translation and transliteration, commentary and discussion questions. *A Family Haggadah*, revised several times, is still in print after 30 years, and has sold over a million copies. *Karben.com*

Evil, a Matter of Intent

Evil, conscious inhumane acts by individuals or groups, has long preoccupied artists. Laura Kruger, curator of this timely exhibition at Hebrew Union College in New York, asks provocatively in the catalogue: "Who is the hero? Who is the tyrant? Are the seeds of evil latent in a hero?" Of the 49 artists in this show, a significant majority are women, among them Andi Arnovitz, Helène Aylon, Debra Band, Judy Chicago, Carol Hamoy, Tamar Hirschl, Margalit Manor, Meadow, Linda Motzkin, Jacqueline Nicholls, Deborah Ugoretz and Grace Bakst Wapner. Through June 30, 2016 at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion New York Museum. ***huc.edu/research/museums/huc-jir-museum-new-york***

Here Comes Moses
Aunt Emmy said he'd find us one day. That boy came North to Freedom in a storm. He lost his mother and father on the way. But never quit. He knew God willing he'd be free. I will never give up, said Moses. He was only twelve years old when he came to claim his Thanksgiving. Day in 1993.
by Faith Ringgold ©2014


THE DAY WAS BITTERLY COLD. SHE WAS HUDDLED NEAR A DOORWAY. HER BODY AND HER HEAD HAD COVERING BUT INSTEAD OF SHOES SHE ONLY WORE SLIPPERS WHICH WERE OPEN IN BACK.....
A MORNING IN WINTER
©HPAGREMANSKI-2012

Clockwise from top left: *Here Comes Moses* by Faith Ringgold, *The Day was Bitterly Cold* by Hedy Pagremenski, *The Mothers of Beslan* by Elizabeth Langer and *The Missed Train* in 1941 by Riva Bell.

Linking Jewish and Muslim Students in New York City

Educators at the Museum of Jewish Heritage have created a program in which Jewish and Muslim pupils in New York City get to know each other. They take trips to a synagogue and a mosque, and speak with a rabbi and an imam who show them the basics of each religion. Then the students bring an artifact or heirloom from home that represents their religious or cultural background, present it to the group and display it in a public exhibition, the Interfaith Living Museum. "I get so excited to see Muslims and Jews working together, learning together, and creating peace amongst ourselves," writes blogger Ameenah Drammeh, recent graduate of the Islamic Leadership School in the Bronx. For more, contact Dr. Paul Radensky, at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, pradensky@mjhnyc.org. *mjhnyc.org*

Chava Rosenfarb, in Yiddish

Chava Rosenfarb (1923–2011) was a noted Canadian Yiddish writer and a major Holocaust literary figure. In a new DVD, *Chava Rosenfarb: That Bubble of Being*, she discusses her life in Lodz, Poland before the Holocaust, her years in the Lodz Ghetto, in Auschwitz, in Bergen-Belsen, and her later career as a Yiddish writer in Montreal. This interview with Anne Fishman Gonshor exposes a rich vein of female creativity in Yiddish culture. In Yiddish with English subtitles, 75 minutes, with a bonus feature of 35 minutes of Rosenfarb reading from her poetry and prose with translations by Kathryn Hellerstein. Produced by the League for Yiddish. *leagueforyiddish.org*

"Stereotype Vulnerability"

In Israel, despite the country's renown as the "start-up nation," only 20% of employees in its high tech industry are women! Israeli Wexner Fellows identify a root cause of this gender gap, caused when few high school girls take upper-level science, technology, engineering and math courses. They blame "stereotype vulnerability," in which parents, teachers and boy peers don't believe girls will be good in these areas. So three schools in Beersheva are piloting a program to change things for all girls, not just those who exhibit special skills. *wexnerfoundation.org/blog/the-women-in-technology-project*

—compiled by Naomi Danis

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ROSE GOLD

by RACHEL MAIZES

WHEN HANNAH, MY MOTHER, GOT DRESSED ON THE morning of August 31, 2002, and put on a rose gold ring and earrings, both decorated with ruby and diamond chips, I imagine she thought of her own mother, the original owner of the set. It was festive jewelry for a festive day, each piece shaped like a small art deco fan. The rabbi's son was celebrating his bar mitzvah across town. Carrying beige pumps, my mother walked three miles in white sneakers to the Los Angeles synagogue because she didn't drive on the Sabbath. Her salon-dyed blonde hair was teased. Her white Anne Klein suit, bought on sale at Ross, brushed her ankles. On her way home, in a crosswalk one block from her apartment on Avenue of the Stars, a bus slammed into her. The ring scraped against the black asphalt. An earring was crushed under her facial bones.

A month later, my three sisters and I gathered in my mother's eighteenth-floor apartment with its white furniture and floor to ceiling windows to divide her possessions. She had bequeathed the most valuable jewelry to us in her will. As for the rest, we set it on her granite tabletop and took turns selecting. My sister Miriam chose a tourmaline ring my mother had designed after divorcing my father and wore to replace her wedding ring. I picked a silver and amethyst bracelet I had always coveted and had occasionally helped my mother fasten because she suffered nerve degeneration in her wrists and hands, the result of an adulterated supplement she took to improve her memory and make her smarter.

As the pile of unclaimed jewelry shrank, the rose gold set became conspicuous. At the time, we were desperate to hold onto anything of my mother's—stained clothing, suit jackets with shoulder pads from the 1980s, and costume jewelry that was so hideous we couldn't help but laugh—but we were afraid of that set, of the disaster it represented.

The pile was nearly gone when I chose it, determined to preserve it in its damaged state. It felt holy to me. I kept it as a monument to her death, taking it out every few months and examining the mangled metal, re-experiencing each time the trauma of losing her.

I created a shrine in my home, made up of photographs in which she smiled, alive, condolence cards that reminded me I was bereft but not alone, and candles whose yellow and blue flames distracted me. You couldn't meet me in those days without learning my mother had died and how. You couldn't have a conversation with me without offering me tissues. The loss became part of my identity and I embraced it as I did the damaged jewelry.

Clients in my estate planning practice waited an eternity for me to draft their wills. I, who knew they might need the documents at any time, couldn't get them done. I apologized and tried to explain. The clients were kind.

About ten years after she died, I began to think about having the jewelry repaired. There would be no going back once it was fixed, but I had begun to feel my mother would not want me to go on mourning with the intensity the jewelry inspired. She would want my memories to be of shared experiences: holidays, graduations—mine from law school and hers with a psychology doctorate—intimate talks about our divorces, and power walks around Rancho Park. I wanted to remember not her reconstructed face in a casket but the way she caressed my cheek with her fingers when she greeted me and how a few weeks before she died she held my hand for no reason, her grip firm and tender. The loss had receded as a touchstone of my identity, and I was ready to let go of its symbol, too.

A jeweler fixed the set. Pinkish metal fanning out, the pieces belong more to my grandmother's taste and era than to my mother's or mine. But I wear them to celebrate both our lives. When a short story of mine, "*L'Chaim*," To Life, was performed on stage, I attended with my new husband and friends. I wore the rose gold jewelry, so my mother could be there too.

The ring scraped against the black asphalt. An earring was crushed under her facial bones. You couldn't meet me in those days without learning my mother had died, and how.

Rachel Maizes's essays have appeared or are forthcoming in Lilith, The New York Times, Spirituality & Health, Moment, and Southwest: The Magazine. She is working on a collection of her widely published short stories.

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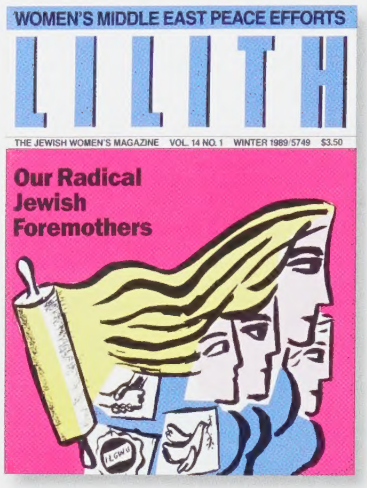
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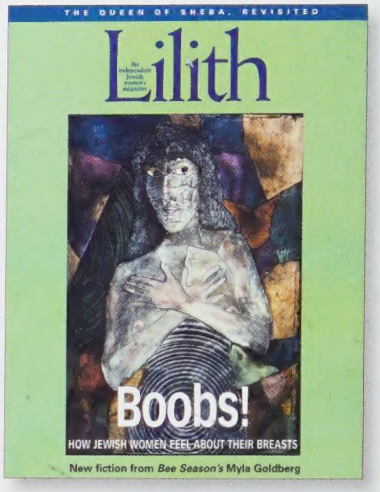
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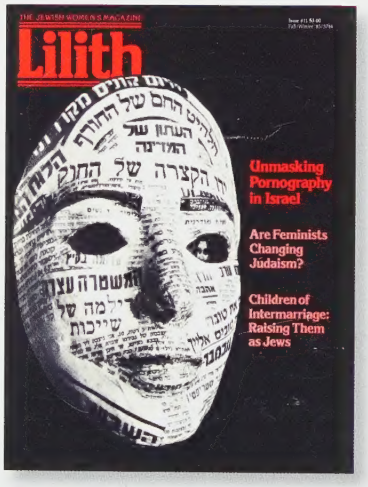
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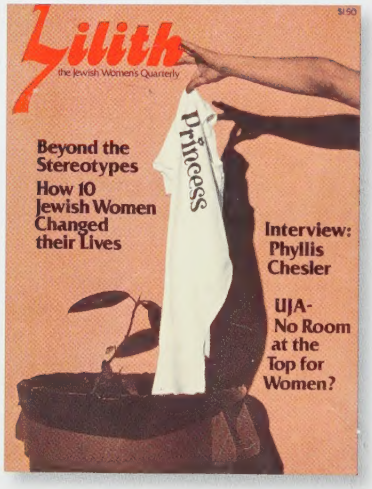

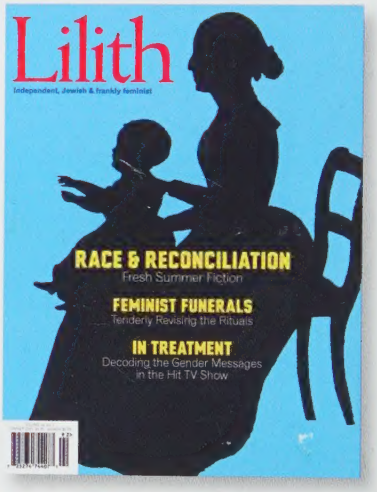

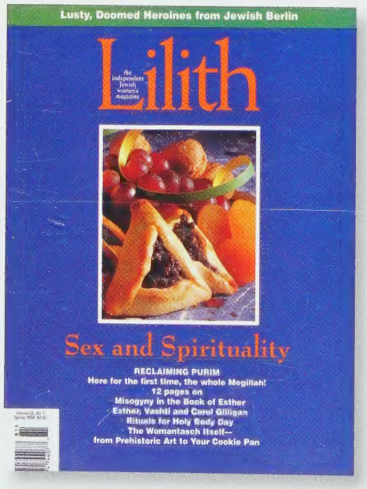
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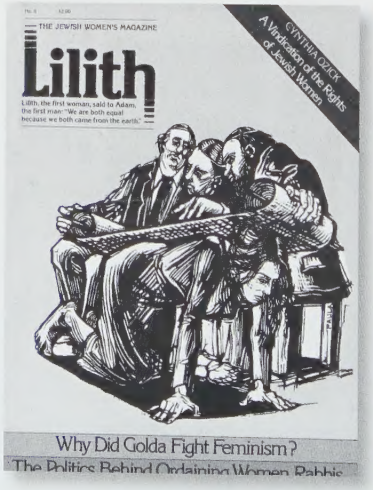
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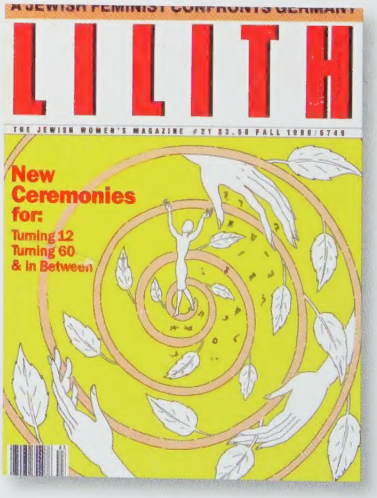

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